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FINDING THEIR WAY: NAVIGATING SOCIAL CLASS BARRIERS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

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FINDING THEIR WAY: NAVIGATING SOCIAL CLASS BARRIERS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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Dedication

- To the Storytellers; John, Nur, Stephanie, Lorena, Bertha, Michelle, and Amore, you are the heart of this project. Thank you for your courage, integrity, talent, strength, humor, laughter, tears, and your might. For your confidence and your trust. For your stories.
- To My Mom, Kathy, You are the inspiration of all of my stories, the source of my voice to tell those stories, and the strength in my legs to stand-up and tell the world.
- To My Husband (to-be), TJ, you are the center of my world, and without your friendship, your laughter, your wisdom, and your love this would have been a lonely and impossible journey.
- To My Sister, Jamie, you are the inspiration for my sense of ability, the truth and the humor I needed to finish, and the confidence I needed to become someone.
- To my father, Gregg, the man who told me that I should never give up, to keep fighting despite the pain, and the reminder that you will always be proud of me…no matter our distance.
- To the generations of students who believe they are, indeed, at risk. May you see, in between the lines of this text, your roadmap for success and may you find the courage to Beat the Odds.

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FINDING THEIR WAY: NAVIGATING SOCIAL CLASS BARRIERS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

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The use of at-risk or disadvantaged terminology often preempts the opportunity for students to freely interpret or make meaning of their class context. Lost in the discourse surrounding students deemed at risk are the underlying stories of students' unique and individual experience in school. These stories provide rich data and a history of successes and failure, more specifically the context from which students navigate meaning making, identity construction, and perceive future education opportunities. In this sense, stories are both the description of a student's pathway over barriers and a heuristic for future action. This study developed a conceptual framework of social class, moving away from categories instead to capture the organic or lived experience of class as a *culture of class.* Second, this study developed a theoretical framework that emerged from critical ethnography to engage stories as a reflection on past journeys to "tease-out" resilient behaviors and

strategies. This is the beginning of *at promise*, recognition of the good, and the demise of *at risk*, a focus on the bad.

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PROLOGUE

Why am I interested in stories? The question swirls around in my head bumping off the accrued years of phenomena, descriptions, boxes of memories, and containers of anecdotes. My interest in stories comes from my approach to life. There is so much more to learn if you have the context: the sights, the sounds, the smells, the colors, and the sensations. In each conversation I share with you, it is my ultimate goal to transport you to the moment of time that the story took place. Most important to the craft of telling is the story itself. I fear the lack of detail in a succinct portrayal. I balk at the idea that you want me to "get to the point" because getting to the point you want to hear cuts my voice from the event altogether. How will you really understand? This is a dissertation about social justice and social action—about understanding the context of a student's life before unfairly judging him or her. This is a dissertation about student survival despite the labels, the injustices, the assumptions, the bias, and the odds.

My stories. Together, they are the living testimony to the process of situating me in reality, to interpreting that reality, and to reinventing that reality. They are the fabric, and the cloth, the pattern, and the colors that come together to form my journey, myself, and my life. They are resiliency come to life and the building blocks of road maps to success. What follows is a dissertation about other people's stories, their moments of time suspended forever between "In the Beginning" and "The End." I learn about the lives of 7 students whom society labeled at risk, and yet despite such

a title, they survived and arrived at the doorstep of higher education. But first, you need to know my story…

Growing up Hans Christian Jessica

Very early in my life it was clear that brevity would not be my strongest attribute. I was a natural entertainer and a storyteller. The smallest incident required a lengthy description of my outfit, the weather, and just the right word to describe the color of the grass. My father was less than fond of my narrative meanderings. He preferred, true to his military background, a succinct reply when queried. In his frustration he would call me Hans Christian Jessica when I launched into an unabridged tale of "my day at school." He stressed that stories cover up the facts, distracting him from some truth that inevitably would be lost in the colorful and detailed version, my version, of the experience. I tried to speak with less imagery and more clarity but always returned to the comfort of details and description. The call to *story* was too strong, and I loathed the idea of leaving out details or not applying, frequently, poetic license. The nickname gradually disappeared from my father's vocabulary, but occasionally, when he asked how my day was, he would remind me that he only had a few minutes, not hours, to hear my response.

I have faded bluejean memories of growing up in western Massachusetts and later spending my formative years in Southern Maine. The days were long and the seasons marked by the running of tiny feet across the grass or snow that connected backyards to one another. Days often began with "go play outside" and ended with

bedtime stories that began, “Once upon a time. . .” We lived to explore the backyards as famous settlers in a brave new world, to create fantastic stories of heroes and magic lands, or to play house, school, or family as the situation dictated. The joyful memories of running free, feeling safe and protected, eating fried chicken from mom’s fry daddy, or sitting on dad’s lap to read Dr. Seuss, these are my early memories of childhood. And then, I turned 5, and the blissful days of waving goodbye to my older sister as she boarded the school bus were a distant memory. I too was going to school.

The bus. Why did it have to be so big and so loud? I remember the fear of leaving, watching my mother wave goodbye to her baby, my fancy new party dress and my white tights disappearing into rust-colored buckle shoes, with two buckles. Imagine my horror. What if I got to school and could not unbuckle my shoes. Maybe I should stay home. With mom. At home. My early years in the school system left a bit to be desired. I was a lonely child, stuck to the sides of recess mothers, afraid to raise my voice in class, unable to concentrate on the books and so unable to connect the letters on the pages with the spoken words of my classmates. Reading was the most difficult of the new subjects I encountered. The second most difficult subject was writing. The penmanship teacher yelled at me, I was too messy. The other kids were too happy to be away from home and my teacher too busy with her first graders to notice that I was afraid. I was invisible.

Day after day of first grade I would return home to the embrace of my mother as I shared stories of the horror of school. Yes, I would say, gym is fun. Lunch in the

cafeteria with my special homemade sandwiches and notes from home was okay. But the school part was terrible! My mother worked with me on my cursive in penmanship books we bought at Toys R' Us. Dad sat for hours with children's books open helping me sound out words and read sentences. By the end of first grade I was reading with the advanced group. The penmanship teacher stopped coming to class, but before she left I spelled *Jessica*, in cursive, on the board just as mom showed me.

My father worked for New England Telephone and my mother stayed at home. They were quite a team. He worked extra shifts to provide for his young family, while she cooked homemade brownies with chocolate chips and grilled hotdogs on an open fire in the pit she dug in our backyard. He was a realist, an objective source of Truth, a sportsman, and a trainer of training-wheel bicycling by weekend. Mom was the sensitive, cuddle-you-when-you-cry, marshmallow fluff and peanut butter sandwich maker who filled life with security and unconditional, endless love. My sister, nearly 4 years ahead of me in school, was and remains my opposite. She is a perfectionist, where I am in a hurry; she is a scientist, where I am a dreamer; and she is my mentor, where I am anxious to keep up with her long strides. Together we were a tightly knit family of four.

Neither of my parents completed college degrees, but from my earliest dinnertime memories we spoke of where my sister, and later I, would go. Everything was a lesson to be learned, and school was not taken lightly. I remember sitting at the kitchen table while Dad quizzed my sister on her times tables or tested me on my ability to read the clock. We were expected to be eager participants in our learning,

and we knew from an early age that education was valued. My mother would remind me always to be the maker of my own destiny. My father would tell me that I could be anything I wanted . . . as long as I made money doing it. Life was normal. And then we moved. And my life changed.

A New Beginning

Her name was Miss Carr. She was in her mid-20s and brand new to the profession. She spent a year or so in Mexico before settling for a second-grade teaching position in Southern Maine. She was instantly my friend, my confidant, my protector, and eventually, when she kicked me out of the nest, my savior. She taught me how to learn, how to be confidant, how to stretch myself beyond my own limits. She introduced me to the gregarious girls in the class who adopted me as their own. In second grade, I learned all I needed to know about surviving school and overcoming obstacles. All because my teacher took time out of the day to take me for a walk around the school, to pay a few extra moments of attention to my reading difficulties, and to see that I was hurting and having the energy to reach out. Ten years later, I would write about her in one of my essays to study early childhood education in college.

The rest of my education, including my early adolescence, sped by. I joined sporting teams, excelled in school, presided over clubs and extracurricular activities. All the while, my parents propelled me forward with reminders of homework, constant attention to detail, stern discipline, and unwavering support. When I was

overwhelmed, my mother would be there to type my papers on our family's computer, or my father would complete the basic measurements of our house for my math assignment. When I asked a question of either parent and they did not know the answer, we would together search the annals of the family's encyclopedias or travel to the library. Mom would proofread, dad would remind me to go to bed, and together they supported my days as a swimmer, field hockey player, outing club enthusiast, and student leader. They videotaped, photographed, and cheered at nearly every one of my junior high and high school events despite busy schedules of their own.

When I entered high school, the first member of the extended Geier family, my sister, went to college in midcoast Maine. Prior to high school, mom worked "mother's hours" for a local entrepreneur, so she was there in the mornings to see me off on the bus and home in the afternoon to welcome my arrival. Anticipating the cost of my sister's college attendance, mom found full-time employment. She was more tired, less likely to be home when I returned from my after-school practices, but dinner was always a family event to catch up on each of our days. This meal, now reduced to three in the absence of my older sister, centered on my life, with the occasional, "Get on with it Hans Christian Jessica" from my father's side of the table.

I was always aware that money was carefully budgeted in my family but never felt like I went without. If I required something of great expense, sports camps, or the newest track shoe technology, my parents would pay half. I was responsible to pay the other half. We always had parties on birthdays, summer family BBQs or graduation celebrations but rarely went on family vacations. Neither mom nor dad

bought new clothes often, instead purchasing fashion fads for their daughters. Rather than attending Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) preparatory classes, my father bought a book full of SAT questions and pretests. We spent weeks practicing my vocabulary and thinking through algebra.

And then it came. The spring of my junior year of high school. My mother requested a week-long vacation from work and handed me a map. We were going on a college tour, and all I needed to do was point the way. We traveled over 1,000 miles that week, from small to large campuses, coed to single-sex, country to city. She never grew tired, she stood at my side extolling the virtues of one campus while equally lamenting the distance she would have to travel *frequently* when I was accepted. I ended up applying to two schools of interest to me, one a long shot and one a competitive state school, and a third of interest to my mother (their financial aid packages were among the highest in the country). I received acceptance to all three, but the decision to attend hinged on how much money they would provide me in aid. In the end, my first choice sent a letter of support that came "close enough" in my mother's estimation that I could go.

That spring my family celebrated the graduation of the first Geier from college while they prepared the way for a second to go. My first day on campus, dad reminded me that they were paying a great deal of money for me to attend the school, so I needed to receive a 3.5 or better to prove I was worth it. My mother, always the voice of reason, told me to have fun. Forget the grades and live the life. She would repeat that mantra to me over and over again in the oncoming years. Or, my personal

favorite, “This too shall pass,” a phrase that proved particularly handy when all seemed lost. Over my 4 years in college my parents would each, unbeknownst to the other, send cards with $10 or $20 bills tucked inside, reminding me to have fun, study hard, and do them proud.

In 2001, my father was diagnosed with a rare and incurable form of lung cancer. As we were taught by my parents, my sister and I spent days researching his disease, signing him up for clinical trials, and talking to colleagues about possible treatments. But, for the first time, knowing enough about the subject was not enough. Shortly before he succumbed to the disease, several months after I finished my master’s degree and 1 year after my sister began a PhD program, my father cajoled me to return to graduate school for a doctorate. “You always want choices,” he said to me, “don’t ever settle.” He died before I received admission to my current doctoral program and before his oldest daughter completed her PhD in epidemiology. At his funeral, many of his friends introduced themselves and praised my sister and me on our academic achievements. It seems my father spent much of his time at work and on the golf course bragging about his upwardly mobile daughters.

In our father’s memory and in standing homage to our mother, my sister and I remain examples of first-generation students, motivated by our parents, our teachers, our ability to participate in activities for growth and development in school, and mainly by the belief that we could be whatever we chose. We were taught to be resilient despite the odds, some great and some minor. We were held accountable for our actions but encouraged to try, if only to fail, because of the lesson to be learned.

My story, although shared briefly here, is my experience with learning difficulties, financial worries, and family crisis. I was labeled at risk by teachers, by social workers, and mostly by a society that assumed I would follow into the working-class world my parents inhabited. This is a story about my culture of class and how I negotiated the journey successfully.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Opening

This is a dissertation about stories of hope and success. What follows is a preservation of stories, the moments of time suspended forever between "In the Beginning" and "The End." You will read about the lives of seven students that society labeled at risk, and yet despite such a title, they survived and arrived at the threshold of higher education. These stories reflect personal experiences, the students' journeys over unsteady and difficult terrain. For some, the journey meant placing one foot before the next and never turning back. For others, the journey meant developing new friendships with people along the way. Together, the stories presented in this research are the fabric, the cloth, the pattern, and the colors that come together to form a foundation for understanding resiliency in spite of social class barriers.

Two key concepts were addressed by this analysis: a fluid, ecological theory on the lived experience of class and a conceptual model to listen, to understand, and to preserve the stories of coping with class, making meaning of life, and beating the odds. The statement of the problem to be studied draws from a theoretical framework that contextualizes class as well as a conceptual model to analyze stories told by students about their *culture of class*. The research questions and mixed-methodological approach veer from traditional research on class, which focuses primarily on socioeconomic barriers, instead defining a culture of class.

Background

This is a dissertation about journeys—the paths we traverse over the rough terrain of childhood and later adulthood, and the meaning we make of our experience. In the field of education, the paths individual students choose demonstrate the process of navigating the barriers implicit to learning, access, and opportunity. In this chapter, I lay out both the theory and the method used to capture the journeys of students, including their contextualized experience of social class and the events or individuals in each student's life that aided him or her in the process of "beating the odds." This is an exploratory, qualitative research project that addresses both the experience of class and provides a unique lens on individual-in-context strategies for addressing barriers to access and opportunity. The participants in this project are themselves examples of resilient adults. They beat the odds and arrived at higher education.

Understanding Culture of Class

Social class is often identified as belonging to a category. This approach to class does not allow individual interpretation to play a role in defining environmental or contextual influences. Stepping away from the theoretical class frameworks of Marx, Durkheim, Olin Wright, and Weber, class is defined as a *lived* or an organic experience that creates an ebb and flow of barriers or obstacles to success. This experience is called the culture of class. The culture-of-class model includes the intersection of five key, constitutive elements: (a) income, (b) wealth, (c) social relationships, (d) race, and (e) education. In concert with one another, these five

elements create barriers and opportunities as the individual interacts with his or her environment. Interaction with the environment, based on biological models of ecology, result in adaptive behaviors that are the building blocks of resilient strategies. Each culture of class is unique to the individual but recognizable perhaps to those who have had similar experiences.

Being Classed

> In *The Last Straw,* Rita Mae Brown (1972) wrote,
>
> > Class is much more than Marx's definition of relationship to the means of production. Class involves your behavior, your basic assumptions, how you are taught to behave, what you expect from yourself and from others, your concept of a future, how you understand problems and solve them, how you think, feel, act.

The experience of *being classed* is how an individual's perceptions of place, ability, access, and future mobility are shaped. Class, as Brown wrote, is not simply the worker versus the overseer but rather the introduction of obstacles and barriers to how one conceptualizes his or her future. Some people begin their classed lives on an escalator, not knowing how they arrived and seemingly unaware of the free ride over what, for some, is the rough ecology of childhood (R. P. Coleman & Rainwater, 1978). Still others begin their lives at the base of a long stairwell, a stairwell with a view of a fast-moving escalator, forced to navigate the rough terrain of childhood, the pitfalls of walking without direction or resources to guide them (L. Rhodes, personal communication, April 2005). The living organism of social class includes a symbiotic

relationship that exists between various factors in our lives including race, gender, socioeconomics, place or community, and opportunity for education.

According to the Children's Defense Fund (2005), "Poverty…represents a constellation of issues, including lack of health insurance, inadequate education, and poor nutrition. Poverty puts children at an unfair disadvantage for future options" (p. 2). The work of R. P. Coleman and Rainwater (1978), Bourdieu (1986), Fussell (1983), Gilbert (1998), and the recent series on class printed in the *New York Times* (2004) identified components or constitutive elements of class that exemplify the "constellation of issues" expressed by the Children's Defense Fund. Beyond the surface-level label of class is a deeper, more meaningful, lived experience of being classed. The meaning that individuals assign to their social class situation as well as the real barriers faced by lower social class standings are explored by the following five constitutive elements of both the perception and the lived situatedness of social class: (a) income, (b) wealth, (c) social relationships, (d) race, and (e) education. Class, beyond the familiar categories of upper, middle, and lower, is thus reconceptulized as a fusion of these five elements.

The interactions between each of the constitutive elements that comprise the lived experience of class are explained through the process of intersectionality. In this analysis, ecological models, specifically the sociological theory of intersectionality, are used as the theoretical foundation of the experience of class as contextual, multilayered, and fluid (Ostrove & Cole, 2003). Intersectionality "renders suspect both the process of categorization itself and any research that is based on such

categorization, because it inevitably leads to demarcation, and demarcation to exclusion, and exclusion to inequality" (McCall, 2005, p. 1777). In this analysis, ecological models and intersectionality provide the platform or context from which a conceptual model of class takes shape.

This research explores the dynamics of five constitutive elements of this culture: (a) income, (b) wealth, (c) social experiences and relationships, (d) race, and (e) education. The barriers and obstacles that result from each of these elements are, on occasion, overcome by the student participants. Their strategies for overcoming these barriers are demonstrated in the stories. In recognizing the barriers and obstacles implicit to a culture of class, we must also acknowledge the resiliency of each student engaged in this research.

The Story of Class: Beating the Odds

Borrowing from the work of Clandinin and Connelly (2000), this research continues the belief that "people are stories are people"; thus, we are the embodiment of the lived experience of stories come to life. The iterative, messy, and raw telling of a story defines the individual journey in a uniquely personal way. Why study stories? This is a dissertation about journeys—the paths we take as individuals and the meaning we make of our experience. In the field of education, the paths individual students demonstrate the process of navigating the barriers implicit to learning, access, and opportunity. Schwandt (2001) defined the scope of qualitative research in the following passage: "It is the *life-world* as it is lived, felt, undergone, made sense

of, and accomplished by human beings that is the object of study" (p. 84) It is through the telling of the story that the students in this study provide the background, the foreground, and the foliage of their lives.

Statement of Problem

Children who are raised in certain social class populations are often referred to as *at risk* or *underrepresented*, or are classified under a theoretical lens called *deficit thinking* (Brandon, 2003; Valencia, 1997). These students, thus labeled, travel an uphill battle towards receiving equitable education. Arguably, students born into lower social class stations are at a disadvantage, not because they are incapable of learning or reaching high standards, but because of the assumptions made about their lack of resources and prospects. This is the key problem in research on social class and education.

Social class is a persistent barrier to equal opportunity for students struggling to successfully graduate from high school and be admitted to a 4-year institution of higher education. Research presented in this analysis provides compelling evidence that students born into lower social class categories are less likely to graduate from high school and nearly 10 times less likely to attend postsecondary education (Zuckerman, 2004). Despite the statistical odds, students from poor social class backgrounds may beat the odds and receive admission to higher education institutions. The problem of interest is how these students triumph over social class barriers.

Purpose

The purpose to this research is comprised of two goals, both of which focus on engaging the politics of education from an individual, and not a global, perspective. The first goal addresses the initial statement of the problem, to understand social class and education from an emergent theoretical perspective. In order to understand class as distinctly unique, this research proposes a theoretical model that addresses the ecological experience of class as uniquely individual. Five elements (income, wealth, social relationships, race, and education) interact to create a lived experience or culture of class. By first positioning in the individual experience, the research then addresses a second goal, how students triumph over barriers that result from their culture of class. The use of personal narratives, within the proposed conceptual model, documents the strategies of 7 students to overcome barriers to higher education.

Research Questions

The lived experience of class, the interaction and influence of five constitutive elements (income, wealth, social relationships, race, and education) on an individual's life as well as the stories that an individual may construct to better adapt to and overcome barriers produced by his or her experience with class were addressed by the following two research questions:

1. How do the individual elements of class (income, wealth, social relationships, race, and education) interact to create a culture of class? How do these elements act as barriers in the lives of students?

2. How do individual stories provide insight into the unique strategies for overcoming barriers to equal access and opportunity in education?

Research Setting and Participants

My research is informed by those researchers who came before me. Lareau's (1987, 2000, 2002, 2003) groundbreaking research on children's experience with class set the tone for in-depth ethnography. MacLeod's (1995) research included participation in the lives of two young gangs growing up poor on the periphery of society. Also, authors such as Suskind (1999), Corwin (2001), and Maran (2000) each brought the ethnographers' eye to the realm of education and used the stories of individual students to illustrate journeys of resiliency. From their research I developed a "toolset" of critical ethnographic methods, including listening, hearing, and providing an opportunity for individual voice.

I chose to work with students who were enrolled in a federally funded program for at-risk students at a large university in the Southwest United States. The university is nationally recognized and boasts rigorous and competitive admissions standards. This program will be henceforth known as Program A to protect both the program and the students' anonymity. Selection of the participants was based on the richness of experience (Polkinghorne, 2005) and not, as is often the case in

quantitative research, the generalizability of the data. Therefore, I focused on targeting a group of students who prequalified for academic services due to their status as first-generation college students, students with physical or academic impairments, or student from low socioeconomic families. This type of sampling is called *purposive sampling* (Patton, 1990) or sampling that provides information-rich cases for in-depth analysis (see also Polkinghorne).

I had the continued support of the assistant dean who oversaw the program as well as the director and administrator affiliated with Project A to conduct this research. The office responded to my request for assistance with enthusiasm, offering to send e-mails on my behalf to the nearly 400 students enrolled in the program. I was also invited to attend the bimonthly colloquiums ranging in topics from "successfully transitioning to college" to "choosing a major."

In early August 2006 I requested that the director of Project A send an e-mail to the students that detailed my project; student involvement; and the projected significance of such an intense, qualitative research endeavor. Four students expressed interest. One later e-mailed back to say he was overwhelmed with school and work and thus unable to complete the first phase of the research, his life story. I started attending Project A's biweekly meetings in early September, sharing in the discussion and bringing along homemade baked goods to be sure they remembered me after they retired to their rooms for the evening. Hearing my story, meeting me, and eating my cookies seemed to bridge the distance between the "unknown" researcher from the e-mails and the woman before them. In 2 weeks' time, 14

students contacted me to say they were interested in participating. One student's sentiment best expresses the vision of this research: "I'm writing because I would like to share my story." Sharing their stories made them feel cared for, listened to, and proud of their accomplishments.

Traditional research of at-risk students typically practices "hit-and-run" data collection, meeting for focus groups or interviews in which the researcher's voice is primary and the students' responses are fit into a research agenda. In an effort to conduct research that addressed the autonomy and power of individual experience, I chose to develop a new model to bring together different expressions of selfhood: the life story; a causal conversation for myself, as the researcher, to engage the story and the student; and photography, a "final say" for the students to identify and define their lives. The developing heuristic, explored in detail in chapter 3, is called the *constellation model*, a metaphor for the clusters of stars from the night sky. I collected the written story first, rather than the discussion, to be sure that the students set the tenor for the information-gathering phase of this analysis. I wanted them to tell me, not the other way around.

The arrival of each new story was exciting. I read their accounts and documented my thoughts in my field journal. Some were painfully honest, raw, and bruised accounts of growing up different, lonely, poor, or feeling always behind. Others talked of triumph, intelligence, and grace. A mix of emotion, experience, and sheer determination formed a new definition of beating the odds. The shared theme, embedded in each story, is one of unexpected resiliency.

The discussions, following the written text, were included to catch information lost in translation from the participant's written text. Interviews, suggested Polkinghorne (2005), provide an opportunity to explore the "layers of experience" (p. 144) not found in the text. I also created a list of questions and clarifications to talk over with the students during the second phase, the discussion, of this project. We met at all times of the day in all types of locations, from my office to the front lawn of the university. Each discussion was taped and immediately transcribed by me, to preserve my memory of the discussion and to enable immediate analysis. Following the completion of the discussion, student participants were provided a disposable camera. They were asked to capture visual representations of their life. The photographs are displayed in chapter 7 as a silent, visual representation of the student's life. They chose their own photos and provided captions, though the source of the photo is withheld to protect the identity of the students.

Assumptions and Limitations

The research presented in this analysis has several limitations. A dependence on the memory of participants to act reflectively and with effective communication skills (see Polkinghorne, 2005) was an assumption as well as a limitation. The students' memories of early childhood were both difficult to recall and painful to share with a stranger. An assumption of this research was that students would write with candor and with some clarity. The research equally assumed that students would be willing, without compensation, to participate in a research project that asked them

to share their life story. From the 400 students who received the e-mail, 16 replied, and 7 completed their constellation of information. Of the 7 who did complete the project, 6 were female and 1 was male.

The primary limitation of this research is a concern of the academy. Qualitative research of this nature is often argued to be less generalizable and therefore, by some accounts, of little value. Whereas this may be a limitation of the research collected in the eyes of scientific or empirical research, in the realm of auto and critical ethnography, individual accounts are meant to stand alone, to question the necessity of verification and generalization, and to oppose the linear definition of valid research. An additional limitation is the small sample size at a large, elite institution of higher education. Seven students do not represent a population. The limitation is the result of time constraints as well as the scope of this project. Collecting stories from more students would have been an enormous endeavor, outside the depth and breadth required for this introductory analysis.

Significance

In the background, introduction, and methodology discussed above, the term *resiliency* appeared time and again. Resiliency is, in this case, the key term to open the discussion for future research. Resiliency is a term reserved for individuals who overcome great obstacles, such as low socioeconomic status, racial and ethnic stereotyping, and unequal access to opportunities to resources, to arrive at the doorstep of higher education. The resilient individual's experience, within his or her

own cultural context, may open wide the discussion of effective population health, equal access, and equitable opportunity. This is the first step in the process of understanding how some children are resilient, despite odds, whereas others are not. Rather than focus on the at-risk factors, this research adds to the literature on *at-promise* behaviors, those behaviors that are driven by resiliency and not risk. A key area of significance for this research is adding to the body of literature on qualitative research, policy development and influence, and teacher training.

Moving from understanding to action is the second area of significance for this research. The risk factors and subsequent resiliency factors exemplified in this small study provide a foundation for future research in the policy and population realm. The development of emergent models on intersectional cultures of class and conceptual metaphors for viewing information adds to the small body of current research on individual resiliency, the use of participant voice, and the leap from understanding to action. A final area of implication for significant change is to challenge the perspective on policy making in the public health and education realms. Moving away from top-down policies, this research redirects the attention of resources to the experience of the individual-in-context and his or her unique action and reaction to the environment. Moving from generalizing small studies to large populations, instead this research focuses on the recognition, or shared experience, of common traits or characteristics. The discussion then begins anew.

Overview of Dissertation

Chapter 1 provides a brief introduction and conceptual overview of the research project at hand. The chapter identifies the key questions and subsequent rationales for conducting this project as well as the purpose of studying social class, context, and the process of telling stories. This research seeks to begin the discussion of social class, apart from the traditional categories used to define class position, as a social role in flux due to the variant nature of the compositional mechanisms of living a classed life. The five compositional mechanisms of class were identified above as (a) income, (b) wealth, (c) social relationships, (d) race, and (e) education. The power of these elements, in concert with one another, defines an individual's position in the class hierarchy.

Chapter 2 is divided into three sections designed to provide a complete picture of class and education. Section 1 provides a short description of class as well as a brief, historical overview of the influence of class on educational opportunity. Section 2 reviews the relevant research as it relates to the five components of class and their collective influence on the student's perception of class as well as his or her access to higher education. Section 3 highlights three disciplines—(a) biology, (b) public health, and (c) social psychology—that employ ecological models, first for understanding the individual-in-context and then for bridging individual data with population policies.

Chapter 3 grounds the research in critical and autoethnographic traditions, drawing from a tripartite of data including individual stories, one-on-one discussions

between participant and researcher to clarify meaning, and photographs taken by participants. The second half of chapter 3 reveals a new model for analysis designed to capture the strength and stability of contextual experience through the metaphor of constellations in the night sky. The aptly named constellation model draws from previous ecological and contextual models (Capra, 2002; Germain & Bloom, 1999; Krieger, 1994; Link & Phelan, 1995; Susser & Susser, 1996) as well as from the work of ethnography, narrative and text analysis, and grounded theory. The key components of the constellation model are the written life story; the collaborative process of meaning making along the conceptual class framework presented in chapter 2; and the final phase of identifying, both in written and photographic forms, the participant's constellation.

Chapters 4–6 are analysis chapters. Each of the 7 students who participated in all three phases of this research project, thus completing their constellation, have a section of chapter 4 that represents the "story," a retelling of the student's story with the researcher's insights, comments from the discussions, and pieces of the stories themselves. Chapter 5 highlights the barriers that the students described, either implicitly or explicitly, to higher education. Chapter 6 identifies the at-promise factors and resiliency strategies that students developed to overcome the barriers in their lives, and in particular, the journey they took to arrive at higher education.

Chapter 7 concludes the dissertation with a thematic summary of the research findings and a discussion of the research questions, specifically addressing areas that may need additional clarification as well as unexpected developments to the

theoretical and conceptual framework. The students' photographs are included in the summary chapter to highlight their visual story. Implications for future research as well as recommendations for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners complete the final chapter. The purpose and scope of this research is restated: to explore and to understand the journeys students take to beat the odds and the resiliency strategies that result. Future research should use this explorative research to move from understanding to action.

Summary

The goals of the Prologue and of chapter 1 were to identify my role as researcher and participant and to provide an overview of the research project. The extant literature on social class and in particular the strategies individuals develop to overcome class-based barriers lacks the voices of students. This is an inductive study that set out to explore class experience and barriers from a population of students labeled at risk. These students beat the odds to arrive at higher education, and it is my hope that by understanding how they navigated social class barriers, researchers may design and implement an intervention, based on this research, for future generations of kids unfairly labeled at risk. In chapter 2, an emergent model of lived experience with class, the culture of class, is defined as a framework for understanding social class as an individualized experience.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

> I think class is everything, I really do. When you're poor and from a low socioeconomic group, you don't have a lot of choices in life. (Correspondents of *The New York Times*, 2005, p. 65)

Introduction

This is a study on social class. Research, traditionally, focuses on class as a categorical position or, by use of proxies such as free and reduced-price lunch and parental occupation, as a means for determining which students should be labeled at risk. This project reinvigorates or revives the discussion of class in the literature, moving away from the traditional classification system and instead focusing on the lived experience of individuals. Class is an organic and fluid experience for each student in this study. Reacting to environmental stimuli, they have developed strategies for overcoming class-based barriers to higher education, including income, wealth, social relationships, race, and education. This is a dissertation about action and reaction to the barriers implicit to one's social class and, more pointedly, about the strategies individuals learn and employ to overcome the odds. Ostrove and Cole (2003) wrote, of their own study on a psychology of class, "The study of social class must, also, move us conceptually beyond a focus on class differences or class as a descriptor or demographic control variable to investigate class as a social identity" (p. 680).

Background

Beginning with the question, "What *is* class, after all? Is it just about money? Education? Social status?" reporters for the *New York Times* (2005) began a rhetorical journey to report, or in essence, to tell the story of class in America. Editor Bill Keller acknowledged, "The subject of class was more formidable—vast, amorphous, politically charged, largely unacknowledged . . . there seemed to be no consensus as to what class meant, let alone whether it mattered" (Correspondents of *The New York Times*, 2005, p. ix). The reporters spoke with individuals who shared their struggles with achieving the American Dream of mobility, success, and domestic bliss. The question remains, does class matter? The answer: Yes, to listen to and understand the stories of class is to understand how to talk about class and, in the field of education, to work towards breaking down the barriers. Class *does* matter (hooks, 2000).

Rising out of the abundance of research defining class according to numerical values, relying on measurements of income or socioeconomic status, is the larger issue of the contextual experience related to class position. Social class is "constituted by a complex combination of social, structural, economic, and cultural factors that are enacted through material and discursive inequalities" (Archer, 2003, p. 11). The aggregate of economic, social, and racial injustices that mitigate mobility, possession of capital, and social networks is hidden by the categorical label. Too often, the term *social class* is tossed about carelessly in American society. In American culture, class represents a manifest destiny for students, a burden that education may or may not alleviate. This research attempted to deconstruct the categories of class placed on

students and to explore the influence of class on a student's understanding of opportunity.

This analysis explores the variable and variability of class, briefly identifying the historical use of class (categories) in education and then reviewing the key areas subsumed under the current term *class*, which include social, economic, and racial influences on academic access. The process of classifying individuals into class categories is a means of assigning status and determining merit. In order to discuss the influence of social class, this study proposes two items: (a) Social class, as a multilayered variable, must be taken into account in the development of educational policy, and (b) to explore social class beyond the traditional and historical implications of categorical analysis, researchers should undertake to hear and see individual student stories, to appreciate the dynamic nature of class.

Section 1: Relevant Research

Defining Class

Previous attempts to define class yielded definitions that ranged from a two-class system that was based on economics (Marx) to a system that allowed for a burgeoning middle class (Weber); new theorists permit multiple categories of class, though the focus remains fixed on socioeconomics (Archer, 2003). Despite the wide application and use, categorical methods to define class are "notoriously problematic" (Foster, Gomm, & Hammersley, 1996, p. 53) and typically rely on occupation or

socioeconomic classifications (Archer, 2003). The categorical approach to defining class generates a single-dimensional image that lacks depth and breadth of coverage. Social science research, including the work of education researchers, uses proxies, such as the self-reported educational attainment of both parents, the occupation of both parents, or receipt of a free or reduced-price lunch (Domhoff, 1983; Ostrove, 2003) to measure social class standing.

This research does not redefine social class; instead, this research set out to stimulate discussion about the experience of being classed. Beginning in 1970, postmodern and poststructuralist theorists attempted to deconstruct (e.g., Fine & Burns, 2003; Gamson & Moon, 2004; S, J. Jones, 2003; McCall, 2005; Ostrove & Cole, 2003) social class barriers, digging below the surface of the category to get at hidden meanings. This research revitalizes the discussion on individual class and the resulting barriers to equal opportunity and access through an emergent model, the culture of class.

History of Class

Karl Marx identified two classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, whereas Max Weber focused instead on the differentiation between class and status (as cited in Gilbert, 1998). Moving beyond Marx's emphasis on purely economic divisions, Weber recognized the importance of lifestyle, laying the groundwork for future social scientists to develop a framework for class categories. Building on the early work of Marx and Weber, contemporary class theorists (e.g., Wright, 1979, 1985, 1997) have

put forth a definition of class that recognizes a range of class categories as well as the role of the individual as owner or nonowner in a class framework. Warner (as cited in Gilbert, 1998) identified the following six class groups: (a) upper upper class (old family elite), (b) lower upper class (slightly richer than upper uppers but new money), (c) upper middle class (business professionals, less affluent than upper lowers), (d) lower middle class (small businessmen, teachers, white-collar industry men), (e) upper lower class (laboring people), and (f) lower lower class (those on public relief and the disrespectable).

In their study of social class dimensions, R. P. Coleman and Rainwater (1978) asked participants in their study, for emphasis, "How many classes would you say there are in America?" (p. 120). There was little consensus among participants. Some respondents suggested two classes, arguing for a system of "them and the rest of us," distancing those with money and those without, versus a three-class system consisting of "the rich," "the poor, people on welfare, or people in the slums," and "the rest of us—which becomes the middle class" (R. P. Coleman & Rainwater, pp. 121-22). R. P. Coleman and Rainwater's findings mirror the current debate on social class and in particular social class categories. There is still little consensus on what class means and how individuals identify with one category or another.

More recently, class was conceptualized by Fussell (1984), who suggested that the prevailing structure of class in sociology recognizes five dominant classes: (a) upper, (b) upper middle, (c) middle, (d) lower middle, and (e) lower. In his own research, however, Fussell articulated nine classes: (a) top out-of-sight, (b) upper, (c)

upper middle, (d) middle, (e) high proletarian, (f) midproletarian, (g) low proletarian, (h) destitute, and (i) bottom out-of-sight. Perhaps George Orwell, cited by Fussell, best articulated the argument of the class continuum:

> Economically, no doubt, there are only two classes, the rich and the poor but socially there is a whole hierarchy of classes, and the manners and traditions learned by each class in childhood are not only very different but—this is the essential point—generally persist from birth to death. …It is…very difficult to escape, culturally, from the class into which you were born. (pp. 27-28)

Maintaining Class: Process of Stratification, Socialization, and Reproduction

Levine (1998) defined social stratification as "the study of the unequal distribution of societal resources" (p. 1). The process by which a pecking order or hierarchical distribution of individuals in the classroom is established illustrates the process of stratification. Social stratification is the process by which class is used to categorically place one student above another, rewarding social class and enriching contextual experience. The process of stratification serves as a ranking mechanism of individuals and groups based on varied social and physical characteristics that recognize wealth, prestige, and powers as ranking agents (Marger, 2002). "The issue of social stratification—who gets what and how—has become central to the discussion of important problems of the day" (R. P. Coleman & Rainwater, 1978, p. 4).

According to Gilbert (1998), "Socialization is a social learning process that prepares new members of a society for adult life" (p. 116) and, in particular, for developing perceptions about class. In a study of 15,000 sixth-grade students in a

New England town, Stendler's (as cited in Gilbert) research of 1949 showed that students had a "fairly sophisticated awareness of the class significance and agreed 70% of the time with adults when both were asked to place their peers in one of three classes" (p. 126). In a study of first, fourth, and sixth graders' perceptions of class, Tutor (1991) showed the students photographs of upper, middle-, and lower class people. The students were asked to match photographs of the people with pictures of houses and cars. Tutor found that all students performed better than expected, with the sixth graders matching the pictures with near-perfect scores.

Although the process of socialization is key to understanding how students reflect social norms and labels, additional research on childrearing practices has indicated important differences in the way students are reared in response to their parents' social class orientation. In 1977, Kohn (as cited in Gilbert, 1998) isolated specific class-based values that parents transmit to their students, which play a substantial role in the perpetuation of social class hierarchies. Social class values, mores, stigmas, and roles are transmitted to individuals through a process of social reproduction. Structuralists argue that schools maintain systems of stratification that enable the reproduction of social roles based on class. "Social reproduction theory identifies the barriers to social mobility, barriers that constrain without completely blocking lower- and working-class individuals' efforts to break into the upper reaches of the class structure" (MacLeod, 1995, p. 7).

History of Education and Class

In his 1806 State of the Union Address, President Thomas Jefferson called for a Constitutional amendment to support federal public education, stating, "An amendment to our constitution must here come in aid of the public education. The influence over government must be shared among all people" (as cited in Padover, 1939, p. 87; also see Jewett, 2006). President Jefferson's grand vision for public education called for extending opportunities to the "mass of talents which lies buried by poverty" that would create a critical mass of educated minds to the benefit of our future (Jefferson, 1817/2005, ¶6). Jefferson's amendment was not considered, and public education remained a state responsibility under the Constitution. From colonial times, early classrooms established and reproduced social order, since wealthy families could afford the luxury of losing a child laborer to the schoolroom.

Two hundred years after his State of the Union Address, Jefferson's words still ring true. The best education is reserved for the social elite and another, lesser education is prescribed for everyone else. According to Weiss (1995), sorting models in education allow institutions to select individuals based on their prospective economic return. Early classrooms set into action a mode for selecting and sorting students by ascribed characteristics including lineage, race, and social class. Implicit to social class standing were co-occurring issues of race, gender, economics, and social norms. Although in 1749 Benjamin Franklin (as cited in Hochschild & Scovronick, 2000, p. 1) famously suggested that we must provide for "the proper education of youth," there was little attention paid to how to educate equally.

Hundreds of years after Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson first envisioned public education, the sorting mechanism is stronger than ever. However, in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), race and ethnicity were used to justify segregation in all aspects of public life, including education. Sixty years later, the Supreme Court overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* in *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* (1954), referred to as *Brown I*, stipulating that separate was inherently unequal (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2000). Though *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* declared segregated schools unconstitutional, the Court did not set a timeline for beginning or completing the process of desegregation, instead mandating in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1956), referred to as *Brown II,* that desegregation proceed with "all deliberate speed" (as cited in Hochschild & Scovronick, 2000). Yet, 50 years later, schools remain racially and economically segregated.

Mobility

Poor students remain in poorer school districts while the wealthier students, already passengers on the "escalator," continue to receive better funded education and access to resources. "The paradox," wrote Hochschild and Scovronick (2003), "is that while schools are supposed to equalize differences in birth circumstances, they cannot mitigate the impact of parents who wish to provide the very best for their students" (p. 2). Bowles and Gintis (1976) diverged from the egalitarian approach to educational access and instead focused on the inequality of the structure of education under capitalistic class structures. According to Bowles and Gintis, schools only

appear to promote equal opportunity for all but in fact reproduce the capitalist labor market, channeling students into specific careers that correspond to class. They suggested a "revolutionary framework" that called for a socialist democracy and the elimination of class rule. Out of the framework, schools are free to fulfill what the Bowles and Gintis called the "tripartite goal: the fostering of social equity, promotion of full development of creative potentials in youth, and the integration of new generations into the social order" (p. ix).

Contemporary research on mobility appears to address Bowles and Gintis' (1976) tripartite in that schools provide an "equal playing field" and students are free to make the choice to either succeed or fail. "There is a broadly shared consensus today that individuals should be able to move up the ladder of accomplishments as far as their talents, character, and determination will take them" (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005, p. 4). Some in the United States argue that education does serve as an agent for equalizing opportunities and ensuring social mobility (Jencks, 2000; Warner, Meeker, & Eells, 1988; Weiss, 1995). Those who believe that mobility can be achieved assert that the American Dream is within reach through due diligence and hard work, and anyone can "bootstrap" themselves out of poverty (Hochschild, 1995; Hochschild & Scovronick, 2000).

According to Aronowitz (2003),

> Many Americans believe that being born poor or working class is not economic destiny, that with a combination of luck and hard work—whether that means earning educational credentials, starting a small business, or hitting the lottery—they can get rich or at least achieve economic security. (p. 15)

The prevailing paradigm for public education suggests that with equal opportunity, through the provision of an accessible, quality public education, any child can grow up to be President of the United States (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2000; Turner, 2000; Weiss, 1995). Contrary to the uniquely American Dream narrative expressed above, MacLeod (1995) argued that hard work is not enough. In fact, according to MacLeod, unequal access to resources contributes to seemingly impassable barriers, due to intrinsic and extrinsic pressures.

The egalitarian myth of education, a story that is told repeatedly to children, is a useful heuristic to encourage students to work hard, to persevere, and to believe in themselves. However, the myth of the American Dream, the success story of the Horatio Algers of the world, is simply a mirage for many students. Social mobility, shunted from birth into a family of low social class, seems impossible. Every day, students follow in the footsteps of Alger, Eliza Doolittle, Orphan Annie, Bill Clinton, Oprah Winfrey, and numerous athletes or musicians who achieve social mobility. The stories told by these successes are the beginnings of a map for those who eagerly seek mobility, looking to higher education as an opportunity for growth.

Summary

Beginning with the work of social theorists, such as Marx and Weber, and later the work of contemporaries such as Erik Olin Wright, Hoschild, Lareau, and the *New York Times*, class traditionally has been viewed from a single-dimensional perspective. Societal recognition of class categories extends to all reaches of the

private and public sector, how individuals interact with one another in work and in leisure, how they make meaning of their world, and how individuals evolve and understand themselves in respect to others in the social and economic food chain. Turning class on its proverbial head, the categorical approach is dismissed as a label and not a definition of living a classed life. In the following section, the context of class, that which is left out of the discussion of historical class categories, is explored. This new revision of old categories stipulates that class is comprised of elements, some more influential than others in an individual's life, which remain fluid and interactive. These five elements are (a) income, (b) wealth, (c) social relationships, (d) race, and (e) education.

Section 2: Breaking Down Class

Individual Barriers in Concert

In their study on the perceptions of social class, R. P. Coleman and Rainwater (1978) categorized the responses of the participants to the question, "What does social class mean to you?" (p. 29). The five categories were called the dimensions of social class: class as (a) money, (b) job, (c) education, (d) social identity and life style, and (e) the implications of ethnicity on class (Barthel, 1978; R. P. Coleman & Rainwater, 1978). Contemporary class theorists have contributed to the constitutive elements of class as follows. From Gilbert (1998) come nine variables that, in the whole, represent the internal framework of the American class structure: (a)

occupation, (b) income, (c) wealth, (d) personal prestige, (e) association, (f) socialization, (g) power, (h) class consciousness, and (i) mobility. The *New York Times* (2005) categorically defined the components of class as income, wealth, occupation, and education. For the purposes of this analysis and drawing from the work of these authors, in particular the *New York Times* and Gilbert, class is conceptualized as a contextual or lived experience, a culture, informed by the interaction of five key elements: (a) income, (b) wealth, (c) social relationships, (d) race, and (e) education.

The five constitutive elements identified in this analysis are viewed as the pieces of a living organism in a constant state of movement and fluidity. The social context of class identifies both the lived experience of class and the unique interactions of each constitutive element of class that together form the life story of an individual. Later in this chapter, the "intersectional" (Gamson & Moon, 2004, p. 47) connections of these elements are situated in an emergent model of class called the culture of class.

Income

> Money, far more than anything else, is what Americans associate with the idea of social class. (R. P. Coleman & Rainwater, 1978, p. 29)

Income, the first of five components or building blocks, is often cited as the sole determinant of social class. Income is used interchangeably with socioeconomic status, a variable often used to define an individual or family's position on the class continuum based on numerical value (R. P. Coleman & Rainwater, 1978). Income, in

the sense of social class, also may set the tone for the four remaining elements of class, as the amount of money one has strongly influences resources, relationships, and academic opportunities. In their 1978 study of social class, R. P. Coleman and Rainwater asked their respondents, "What does social class mean to you?" (p. 29). The responses generated discussion of money. Said one respondent, "It's money that makes social class—money controls everything" (p. 29).

According to the Children's Defense Fund (2005), in order for a family of three to be living in poverty, their income was at or below $15,219 per year and for a family of four, below $19,157 (p. 1). However, the antiquated model developed by the a new model for judging poverty thresholds was introduced in the early 1960s and has yet to be updated to reflect national inflation rates (University of Wisconsin Institute for Research on Poverty, 1998). The model does not reflect real-time spending habits for the 21st century. In 1960, the model predicted that a family spent 1/3 of their income on food; today food expenditures total 1/7 of a family's income (Children's Defense Fund, 2005, p. 1). Income, used as a barometer of social class, is only the foundation of deprivation experienced by students.

Table 1, with data compiled by the Children's Defense Fund (2005) speaks to the importance of income on the resources and opportunities provided to students. Table 1 reports the basic needs of a single parent raising two children (ages 4 and 7) and working a full-time, minimum-wage job.

The projected annual costs presented in Table 1 clearly demonstrate that the 1960 model for poverty determination is doing an injustice to children and to families

struggling to survive. In this instance, income, or lack thereof, serves as an enormous barrier to basic needs, all of which influence a young student's perception of access to higher education.

Table 1

Annual Cost of Basic Needs in 2005

Basic needs	Cost of needs ($)
Housing	9,660
Food	5,124
Child care	7,440
Health care	810
Clothing	720
Transportation	4,992
Miscellaneous	1,230
Total cost	29,976

Note. From *Defining Poverty and Why it Matters for Children* (p. 2), by the Children's Defense Fund, 2005, Washington, DC: Author.

Why talk about poverty in relation to income and education? Table 2 was excerpted from the Children's Defense Fund (2005) report, *Defining Poverty and Why it Matters for Children,* to demonstrate the effect of lower incomes on educational achievement. In the next section, income as a barrier to higher education is explored in more depth, specifically, how income serves as a deterrent for admissions and what selective college and universities are doing to mitigate income-related obstacles.

Table 2

Effect of Lower Incomes on Educational Outcomes

Educational outcomes	Effects on exam
Math scores at ages 7–8	5 test points lower
Reading scores at ages 7–8	4 test points lower
Repeated a grade	2 times as likely
Expelled from school	3.4 times as likely
Dropout at ages 16–24	3.5 times as likely
Finishing a 4-year college degree	Half as likely

Note. From *Defining Poverty and Why it Matters for Children* (p. 2), by the Children's Defense Fund, 2005, Washington, DC: Author.

Income as a barrier to higher education. At the heart of the argument surrounding income and access to higher education is the debate over whether the cost of college attendance is a strong enough deterrent to assure that students from lower social classes will not perceive themselves as viable candidates for admission. McDonough (1997) found that students from the lowest socioeconomic quartiles are nearly 40% less likely, despite their high achievement level, to attend higher education institutions than their intellectual peers in the highest socioeconomic quartile. In an article for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer,* Nyhan (2005) wrote, "The divide between the wealth and poor in educational opportunity threatens to perpetuate the cycle of poverty for thousands of working poor families" (¶5).

Citing a 2003 report by the Postsecondary Education Opportunity Research Group, Nyhan (2005) reported that 8.6% of students from families with a reported

income of $35,901 (the poorest quartile) as opposed to 75% of students from families with a reported income of $95,040 and above (the wealthiest quartile) earned a bachelor's degree by the age of 24. The Century Foundation, a New York think tank, published a report that further suggested that 3% of students from the lowest quartile are represented at the 146 most selective colleges and universities (Kahlenberg, 2006).

In a 2006 edition of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, two authors were presented with the issue of what serves most as a barrier to higher education: academic readiness or financial support. One author, Kahlenberg (2006), stated that the cost of attendance or lack of income is the key obstacle to attending higher education. "This is rapidly becoming the unequal opportunity society. Young people face a double whammy: Colleges are harder to get into, and only the well-off can afford a college education these days" (Zuckerman, 2004, ¶1). The other author, Forster (2006), argued that the problem is not financial but instead an issue of academic readiness. Academic readiness will be explored in more depth later in this literature review during the discussion of education itself as a barrier to higher education. However, Kahlenberg's argument regarding income as a key deterrent to higher education is important to highlight.

Kahlenberg (2006) argued that income serves as a steep barrier to higher education, suggesting that even the nearly $4,000 that represents the Expected Family Contribution for low-income financial aid applicants by the federal government is a nearly impossible contribution for poor families. Perhaps the decrease in Pell Grant

dollars and the increase in merit-based scholarships, which are need blind and tend to benefit those with higher incomes (Kahlenberg, 2006), are rationales for the staggeringly low attendance at 4-year institutions for students from the lower income quartiles. Zuckerman (2004) found that 4.5% of students from the lowest income quartile, 12% from the next income quartile, 25% from the third, and 51% from the highest income quartile receive a bachelor's degree by the age of 24. Thus, students from the highest income quartile are nearly 10 times as likely to receive a bachelor's degree as students from the lowest income quartile.

According to the Century Foundation, where Khalenberg (2006) is Senior Fellow, the myth that students from low income quartiles will not do well at selective institutions is unfounded. "There is a rich supply," wrote Khalenberg, "of highly capable low-income students who could do the work" (p. B51). Khalenberg suggested that although class-based affirmative action may result in an increase of nearly 20% of students from the lowest income quartiles, there will be little effect on graduation rates. Class-based affirmative action, or admissions policies that recognize need, thus giving an advantage to those students who represent class diversity, is relatively new to the higher education arena. In the early days of the new millennium, universities and colleges around the country began to review the opportunity for yet untapped student resource in the lower social-class quartiles. For example, Harvard announced it would not require any parental contribution for families earning les than $40,000 a year (Stern, 2004). Universities such as Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Williams, and Amherst are introducing admissions programs designed to attract bright students from

the lowest income quartiles with promises of full-ride tuition waivers upon acceptance.

Earnings potential of college graduates. A secondary implication of income is the possibility of translating earned degrees from institutions of higher education into better paying careers. Higher education embodies the hope of a brighter future for all Americans. Studies conducted by social scientists and economists, such as Becker (1963), conclusively have demonstrated that a degree correlates with success in the marketplace, both in job security and pay rates. Arenson (2004) linked income and education, suggesting that low holdings in either income or education represent serious disadvantages for individuals.

Social Relationships

R. P. Coleman and Rainwater (1978) asked participants in their study on social class and education to identify the most important factor or factors that affect social class standing. The "upper class" respondents in the study reported, "too many other things have to be considered to say that income is most important…prestige depends on the circle you're with socially" (R. P. Coleman & Rainwater, p. 49). The status attributed to the "circle you're with" demonstrates the importance of social relationships, in particular the resulting social capital that develops from those relationships. R. P. Coleman and Rainwater called these social relationships *connections* and argued that connections are often envied more than financial success.

Bourdieu (1986) called these connections *networks,* and through networks, individuals accumulate *social capital*.

People. Social relationships, as a constitutive element of class, have an indirect effect on the lives of students. These relationships are predicated upon the networks built by their parents through occupational or financial venues as well as the interaction that occurs between the student and the individual or group. According to Sewell and Shah (1968), parental encouragement is a powerful predictor of a student's decision to enroll in higher education. These relationships include parents, siblings, teachers, and the sense of belonging derived from social organizations.

"The earliest and most enduring ecological context is the home itself" (Massey, Charles, Lundy, & Fischer, 2003, p. 46). The context of the home is essential to the successful development of a child. Parents and siblings model behaviors that are either productive or nonproductive for the student's development. Nonproductive behaviors may be demonstrated by siblings who abuse drugs and alcohol, neglect or downplay schooling, or refuse to obey household rules. Siblings may equally demonstrate productive behavior, working to support the family, setting a path for the younger family members to follow in academics, and reaching higher education. Parents must be equally accountable to their children's behaviors, modeling a strong worth ethic and commitment to success. The most important role a parent may play in the child's academic journey is that of arbitrator and peaceful lobbyist (see Cashin, 2004, for a description of parents who lobby successfully for their children in the academic arena).

In her research on peer effects, Hallinan (1983) identified two strategies for interaction that are equally transferable to all relationships. The first is *contextual peer effects*, which are those effects derived from the student's environment, including demographic shifts, social groupings, and economic influences. The second is *proximate peer effects,* which are those effects resulting from interactions with close personal relationships, such as friendships, as well as parental or sibling exchanges. The effects of personal relationships on an individual vary greatly and, in the care of peer groups, may disrupt the student's academic progress.

Relationships and social communities appear differently along the class continuum. According to Gilbert (1998), people at higher class levels (a) sustain active social lives and possess more friends, (b) are less inclined to maintain childhood friendships, (c) socialize less with family, and (d) entertain friends at their homes. In her research of inequality related to socially classed childhoods, Lareau (2003) presented extensive ethnographic fieldwork of students from various social class backgrounds and their relationships to the social world. In particular, Lareau found that students from the middle to upper class are more inclined to be involved in numerous activities outside of the home, fracturing their ability to sustain lengthy friendships from students in their neighborhood as well as more structured leisure time, either with a parent or a "play date" from the child's school (scheduled typically by parents).

Social networks. In the realm of education, social networks are provided for students in their school environment. Portes (1998) noted that social capital is

acquired through an individual's relationships with other individuals, particularly through membership in social networks and other social structures. Not only do schools provide an environment for students to foster a sense of community, but they also may be the first environment where a student becomes acutely aware of his or her social class. Social networks are used to depict individual agents and communities as entangled in manifold sets of interdependent relations, or webs of attachments and connections (Blackshaw & Long, 1998). Social networks are a series of relationships that connect individuals, presumably of a shared class, to one another.

Social networks reflect the "social part of behavior; the part that is concerned with the ways individuals interact and the influence they have on one another" (Freeman, 2004, p. 1). The social interaction that occurs within groups in neighborhoods or in classrooms, for example, both solidifies and reproduces social class categories. In 1941 Warner and Lunt (as cited in Freeman, 2004) authored a now-famous study of social stratification referred to as the "Yankee City" study, due in part to the choice of Newburyport, Massachusetts, as the setting. However, the research highlighted the influence of social networks, in part, the relationships between residents of Newburyport as well as the "extremely complex and highly elaborate society of Yankee City" (Warner & Lunt, as cited in Freeman, 2004, p. 45).

MacLeod (1995) wrote of social networks in his ethnographic research on rival gangs in the Clarendon Heights housing project. The two gangs, the Hallway Hangers and the Brothers, shared with MacLeod the importance of creating a network in the dismal surroundings of housing projects as well as on the equally violent city

streets. Membership in one of the two gangs required fierce loyalty, complete commitment to maintaining group solidarity, and a willingness to look out for the other members well-being. Slick, a member of the Hallway Hangers, described the network as follows:

> What it is, it's a brotherhood down here…we're always here for each other. No shit. There's not a guy in here that wouldn't put out for one of the rest of us. If he needs something and I got it, I'll give it to him. Period. That's the way it works. It's a brotherhood. (MacLeod, 1995, p. 35)

In the case of the Hallway Hangers and the Brothers, social networks provided by membership in the gangs were a means of survival and camaraderie. Portes (1998) suggested that group involvement is a positive consequence of social class relations "dating back to Durkheim's emphasis on group life as an antidote to anomie and self-destruction" (p. 2).

Social capital. Social capital appeared in mainstream social science research in the late 1980s in the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and American sociologist James Coleman (as cited in Dika & Singh, 2002). Bourdieu (1986; also see Dika & Singh, 2002) focused on identifying three key elements of capital: (a) economic, (b) cultural, and (c) social. Paralleling the work of Bourdieu, James Coleman focused on the role of social capital in the creation of human capital, specifically in his theories about the significance of family involvement in education (J. S. Coleman, 1988; J. S. Coleman et al., 1966; Dika & Singh, 2002; Williams, 2005). Social capital, according to J. S. Coleman (1988), "inheres the structure of relations between actors and among actors" (p. 98) and ensures that relationships or social networks encourage trust, information sharing, and positive transition of norms

(Dika & Singh, 2002). Bourdieu and J. S. Coleman differ in their interpretation of access to social capital and more specifically, the structures in place. J. S. Coleman's (as cited in Dika & Singh, 2002) research suggested that it is the "family's responsibility to adopt certain norms to advance children's life chances" (¶7). Bourdieu's (1986) research on social capital emphasized structural constraints and unequal access to institutional resources based on class, gender, and race (Dika & Singh, 2002).

More recent research on social capital (Baron, Field, & Schuller, 2000), has defined social capital as access to broad social networks and more specifically the mutual benefits gained from belonging to a social network. Social capital, therefore, is strongly correlated to an individual's social class. Groups attempt to improve or maintain their position, or life chances, by restricting access to rewards and privileges to those who share similar lifestyles and other socially defined characteristics (Levine, 1998). The implication of an exchange of prestige and privilege among individuals of certain social classes undermines the value of public education and denounces the belief that schools are equal for everyone. The implications of social capital and subsequent networks built around shared social class in education is illustrated in the following quote from Warner et al. (1988):

> It is common knowledge that the sons and daughters of the Gold Coasts, the Main Lines, and Park Avenues of America are more likely to receive recognition for their efforts than the children of the slums. The distance these fortunate young people travel to achieve success is shorter, and the route up easier, than the long hard pull necessary for the ambitious children of the less fortunate middle class. (p. 60)

The resulting "short road" or pipeline is reflected in a student's perceived access to higher education.

Social relationships and access to higher education. Portes (1998) proposed three functions of social capital: (a) as social control, (b) as family support, and (c) as benefits reaped from social networks. Social capital, as a form of social control, serves to maintain class divisions, restricting access to privileges and rewards to those individuals who share similar social class backgrounds (Levine, 1998). The social capital derived from social networks assures that mobility will not be an issue for some members of society, whereas for others it will be nearly impossible. Legacy programs in higher education admission are an example of social capital serving a specific population while simultaneously ignoring another. Family support, as demonstrated by parental involvement, is important both to introduce students to the norms and stigmas of their social class position and to expose them to the opportunities afforded them due to their class. Finally, the benefits are plentiful for social networking outside of the immediate family unit. The phrase, "It's not what you know, it is who you know," exemplifies the benefits of social networks. Finding a job, getting accepted to college, and gaining entry into a country club or an exclusive social environment are all the result of strong social network connections.

Schools provide an environment for students to foster a sense of community and belongingness. Ostrove et al. (2003) defined belongingness in their study of Radcliffe graduates' experience with social class as "feelings of alienation (representing lack of belongingness to the social community) and of family traditions

and expectations for where the women would attend college (representing belongingness)" (p. 776). Therefore, a student's particular social class is acted out in his or her social networks and predicated upon their levels of social capital.

> While people from working-class backgrounds may experience a profound sense that they do not belong, people from upper-class backgrounds may be socialized to believe that certain domains are "theirs," and are created to maintain their class position and to isolate them from the rest of society. (Ostrove, 2003, p. 773)

Belongingness to a social network or community may help or hinder their progress through schools, their success on accountability measures, and their derived sense of self.

Wealth

Distinctly different from measurable income or socioeconomics is the third constitutive element of class: wealth. In the previous section, the topic of social capital was explored, as it relates to both familial involvement (social relationships) and the networks that benefit individuals, where often the "gentleman's handshake" is enough to cement a deal in the business world, or a phone call from an associate guarantees admission to a prestigious preparatory school. Wealth is representative of access to resources, parental educational attainment, and cultural capital. In the case of access to higher education, the accumulation of wealth means a ride on the elevator.

Family. A large body of research exists on the transfer of social class from parent to child (e.g., J. S. Coleman, 1988; R. P. Coleman & Rainwater, 1978;

Hochschild & Scovronick, 2000; Karabel, 2005; Lareau, 1987, 2000, 2002, 2003). Parental occupation, parental educational attainment, and parental social network all contribute to a child's perception of social class as well as to a child's access to resources and cultural capital. According to Perna and Titus (2005), "The involvement of a child's parent(s) in his or her life is associated with higher odds of college attendance and enrollment, and lowered rates of behavioral problems such as dropping-out of high school and truancy" (p. 488).

In her 2003 study on the middle class and education, Brantlinger interviewed affluent mothers and school personnel on topics ranging from "perception of education, their values and goals regarding education, their understanding of education in the local area, and their views of the relations between social classes in the town and its schools" (p. 34). One mother, Nancy, shared her opinion on the difference between parenting in middle-class and poor families in the following excerpt:

> A big difference exists between middle-class and poor parents. College parents are interested in their kids. They are always willing to come in, have talks with their kid. Most lower-class parents don't get involved at all. They don't really care. Then poor kids get a poor foundation in elementary school; they don't get the same start as higher-income students get. If they don't pick up basic skills, they're stuck, and it becomes impossible to catch up. The best achieving kids are professional people's kids, and more higher-income kids are willing to get involved in extracurricular activities. (Brantlinger, 2003, p. 99)

Cultural capital. Cultural capital, according to Bourdieu (1986), exists in three forms: (a) The embodied state includes a person's skills and knowledge accumulated over a lifetime; (b) the objectified state includes all tangible items such

as books, musical instruments, or technology such as laptop computers; and (c) the institutionalized state includes academic successes and achievements, credentials, and conferred degrees or certificates by authorized agencies (Bourdieu, 1986; Pascoe, 2003; Reay, 2004). According to Pearce (2006), "Schools reproduce a stratified class system by bolstering the dominant social group's cultural capital" (p. 77). Cultural capital is the collective result of the involvement of parents. Earlier in the analysis, the concept of social capital was explored in terms of access to networks.

Drawing from the work of Bourdieu and the relationship of cultural capital to equitable access to education, Pascoe (2003) suggested that the imbalance between the students from wealthy families and their economically disadvantaged peers is to impart to the accumulated cultural capital of the former over the latter. At the center of the debate over equitable access to education is the equally important issue of access to resources. Children born into lower social class families are hindered by their lack of access to generations of cultural capital. McLaren (1989) wrote, "Academic performance represents, therefore, not individual competence, or the lack of ability on the part of disadvantaged students, but the school's depreciation of their cultural capital" (p. 198).

Kyratzis (2005) further distinguished cultural capital as a system of attributes, including a facility with language and analytical skills, cultural knowledge (such as exposure to literature, or museums), and appropriate social behavior (such as cultivated manners and an ability to conduct oneself in a sophisticated manner). Born

to a poor family, a child may have limited exposure to resources such as books, computers, or engaged parents and role models.

Wealth and access to higher education. Lareau and Weininger (2003) conceptualize cultural capital "as a theoretical tool for understanding how inequalities are generated through school, thus overlooking inherent potential" (p. 568). The imbalance between those born into disadvantaged homes and those born into advantaged homes is most apparent in the classrooms, where the amount of cultural capital an individual holds directly influences his or her learning. Larry Summers, former President of Harvard University, summarized the implications of low cultural capital in relationship to learning opportunities, "You went to a school that didn't do as good a job coaching you for the test. You came from a home without the same opportunities for learning" (as cited in Correspondents of *The New York Times*, 2005, p. 101).

A lack of cultural capital indeed limits the opportunities for higher education for students from low social class contexts. These students, generally first-generation college students, do not have the resource of collective memories and experience from parents who attended higher education. McDonough (1997) argued that students whose parents attended college "get a head start on college preparations in elementary school by taking the right courses, maintaining good grades" (p. 6), and being exposed to pertinent college information, including visiting a parent's alma mater or interacting with family and friends with college educations.

Access to educational resources is explored in more detail later in this analysis. However, it is clear that without family and peer support as well as a store of cultural capital, students face an uphill battle to find institutions of higher education that are suitable for them. In the case of Cedric, whose story was the basis for Suskind's (1999) book, receiving admission to Brown University was the easy part; keeping with up the language, building a background in literature and understanding the vernacular of the elite was almost impossible.

Race

> At first I thought being an Asian-American was an obstacle for me in a private school. I discovered the bigger obstacle was the class difference. My family was poor and not sophisticated. Here were wealthy, educated, and powerful people. Their life-style and way of dealing with things were totally different. (Gong, 1991, p. 81)

The fourth constitutive element of class, race, is meant to expose the social marriage of race and class, or the intertwined nature of the two, often found in the discourse on class. Ortner (1998) asked research participants to speak of their social class and found that many were baffled when they were not also asked to acknowledge their race or their ethnicity. In an attempt to get at the true meaning of class, Ortner's research did not permit the participants to speak of their individual experiences of living a classed life, which included discussion of race and ethnicity. In contrast, Cole and Omari (2003) argued that it is at the very line of intersection between class and race that the most meaningful information will be discovered and that stereotypes may be deconstructed. Reconceptualizing class as a *lived* experience

also acknowledges that race and class are intertwined, and as such race may significantly affect the meaning-making experience of an individual.

(De)constructing race. In his research on "color blind racism" Bonilla-Silva (2003) suggested a model to theoretically "unpack" race, which includes understanding the terms, the reproductive processes in place to reinforce the use of the terms, and the ideology. This model is a starting place to understand the construction of race within the overarching realm of class that includes an underclass, a working class or working poor, a lower class, a middle class, an upper class, and an upper upper class (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). The structure in place to uphold racial categories, according to Bonilla-Silva, is "the totality of the social relations and practices that enforce [White] privilege" (p. 9). Structures that label individuals with class categories do so to maintain a social hierarchy. Finally, Bonilla-Silva defined ideology as encompassing the following elements: "common frames, style, and [racial] stories" (p. 10). Class ideology includes all constitutive elements of race and gender ideology coupled with an additional layer of stratification and reproduction based on economic success.

In their study of social class, R. P. Coleman and Rainwater's (1978) final chapter on the dimensions of class was written by Diane Barthel. In her report on ethnic differences, Barthel (1978) reported that participants responded to a prompt about race and class, "I think in this country social classes are obviously along income, ethnic, and religious lines," or "Blacks are a distant class, but they are trying to move up…WASPS [White, Anglo-Saxon Protestants], Catholics, poor, middle,

rich—they're all classes" (p. 92). A Boston woman of the college-educated professional world said,

> You must realize that minority groups have problems – they are caught within their groups because of their appearance, education, and maybe language barriers…A lot of people think the Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, and Italians are a lower class than we are, but I don't. (as quoted in Barthel, p. 93)

Race then, is a function of class categorization as well as a product of social and role reproduction. The danger of such stereotyping is to diminish the voice of the marginalized group not once but twice, first as an act of classism and second as an act of racism. Race, on the contrary, is not yet a proxy for class during the process of social sorting (Lynn, 2004; Weiss, 1995) either in the real estate market, the academic arena, or the realm of employment race is identified as the only visible marker of assumed class.

Racial identity and belonging. Racial identity, according to Ostrove and Cole (2003) is not easily separated from class identity. The work of Massey et al. (2003) introduced racial identity from several key areas, addressed in more depth below, including community or neighborhood segregation, as well as the development of belonging identified in the work of Omi and Winant (1994). More frequently in social interactions, race is synonymous with class. Crenshaw (1994), specifically addresses a growing need for observing the key differences between race and class, suggested that "categories" do not tell the whole story. Pattillo-McCoy found, for example, that Black middle-class neighborhoods are significantly different than White middle-class neighborhoods, despite the fact that the two groups shared class categories (see also

Cashin, 2004; Massey et al., 2003). The difference is key in building a sense of identity, a psychology of self separate from one's class category.

Omi and Winant (1994) cited Clarence Pendleton's comments to President Ronald Reagan about the U.S Commission on Civil Rights in their introduction to *Racial Formation in the United States*. Explicating the problem of societal reaction to race, Pendleton said that members of the Commission were "working on a color blind society that has opportunities for all and guarantees success for none" (as cited by Omi & Winant, p. 1). The authors' choice of Pendleton's comments to begin their book speaks to the heart of this research. To see and to acknowledge individual difference is to accept those differences. The formation of divisions, be they along class or race lines, guarantees that only the very few elite will be successful. The divisions, argued Hall (1980), are explained by economic structures and processes (see also Omi & Winant, 1994).

The divisions raised by Hall (1980) are preciously the cause of concern of Black parents who move into predominantly White, wealthy neighborhoods to provide access to better educational opportunities to their children, according to Tatum (2000; see also Cashin, 2004; Massey et al., 2003). The Black parents in Tatum's study expressed concern over their children's development of a strong, racial identity. The strength of identity, as it relates to race, is an important factor in the presence of barriers to higher education. Tatum cited the work of Ogbu (1986, 2003) as students' fears mounted over "acting White," a term reserved for minority students who do not act true to their race. A strong racial identity, which requires capable and

successful role models as well as parental involvement, strengthened the students' resolve to beat the odds.

> Societal messages about the presumed superiority or inferiority of various racial or ethnic groups influence our perceptions, both of ourselves and of others. As such, racial attitudes are crucial to the development of self-identity, especially for minority group members. (Massey et al., 2003, p. 133)

However, in the case of race, a secondary layer of disparity and assumed disadvantage, a strong identity may not be sufficient to navigate the barriers to higher education. "The most common understanding of school failure among low-income children of color and the one deeply embedded in the individual consciousness of teachers, scholars, and policymakers "blames the victim" (Brandon, 2003, p. 38). Victim-blaming ideology continues to threaten the formation of identity among minority students, instilling a sense of manifest destiny and probable hopelessness.

Steele (1988, 1992, 1998) called this academic underperformance *the theory of stereotype threat*. Steele's theory (as cited in Massey et al., 2003) stipulates that subconscious fears of meeting academic expectations, thus living up to negative stereotypes about their racial or social group, cause students to fail or to accept failure in the academic arena. The research by Herrenstein and Murray (1996) in *The Bell Curve* upheld this notion of racial inferiority, again undermining racial identity and belonging. A lack of strong identity, or sense of confusion over belonging due to class and race dualities, presents a barrier to higher education.

Race as a barrier to higher education. Education, historically and perhaps traditionally, has not been the home of equal opportunity.

> One potential explanation for the underperformance of Blacks and Latinos in U.S. college and universities is that the schools they attend as children and teenagers prepare them less well for collegiate work by providing lower-quality education, or that their schools actively harm their capacity for learning by exposing them to deleterious and maladaptive environments characterized by violence, social disorder, and concentrations of poverty. (Massey et al., 2003, p. 15)

Massey et al. (2003) suggested that the absence of racial parity in U.S. institutions of higher education may be the result of continued segregation in communities around the country. The authors cited literature from J. S. Coleman (1966) to more recent work by Orfield (1993), Orfield and Eaton (1996), and Kozol (1991) to point out disparities in academic resources, prepared teachers, strong role models, and a growing sense of isolation for young Latino and Black students. Fifty years ago the Supreme Court decreed universal desegregation of public schools. Yet, segregation remains, possibly, one of the most influential barriers to higher education opportunity for young, minority students.

In the landmark case, *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978), Justice Powell wrote that in order for race-based admissions to be acceptable they must be narrowly tailored. "A race-conscious admissions program cannot insulate each category of applicants with certain desired qualifications from competition with all other applicants" (*Regents of University of California v. Bakke,* 1978). Still, race remains an issue in admissions practices, specifically, some individuals' perception of who is qualified, how to define qualification, and who merits admission to the program.

In *Hopwood v. Texas* (1996), Cheryl Hopwood argued that she was better qualified than some of the minority students admitted to the law school under an affirmative action program. The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals agreed with Hopwood, speaking for the majority,

> The law school has presented no compelling justification, under the Fourteenth Amendment or Supreme Court precedent that allows it to continue to elevate some races over others even for the wholesome purpose of correcting perceived racial imbalance in the student body. (*Hopwood v. Texas,* 1996)

In response to *Hopwood v. Texas* (1996), The University of Texas System lobbied for Texas House Bill 588 (1997), which automatically grants admission to all Texas students who graduate among the top 10% of their senior class.

Some years later the court found in *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2002) that the Equal Protection Clause does not prohibit Michigan Law School's narrowly tailored use of race in admissions decisions to further a compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2002). Currently, race may be considered, along with class, in admissions decisions provided, under the Supreme Court's finding in the 2002 Michigan cases, the decision remains subjective and serves a compelling state interest. However, the consideration of race in admissions does little to equalize opportunity, access to resources, and fear of retribution faced by students of color every day in classrooms around the country.

Extensive research has been conducted on academic achievement (or underachievement) as it relates to students of color. In particular, research has

examined the role of race in social development (Danziger & Sanziger, 1993; Kozol, 1991; Lareau, 2002); the academic arena (Correspondents of *The New York Times*, 2005; Corwin, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Maran, 2000); and perceptions, attitudes, and deficit-thinking (Brandon, 2003; Campbell & Fleming, 2000; Oakes, 1985; Rothstein, 2004; Sacks, 2003; Valencia, 1997). Race serves as barrier to higher education because of institutional racism and stereotyping through the process of tracking and internal, social pressures to remain culturally conscious (S. J. Jones, 2003). Minority high school students are often prejudged by administrators and teachers based on assumed deficit or by their peers, should the student show an interest or a proclivity for academic coursework.

Tracking. Public education serves to "track" students into a social caste system "sending wealthy children down the road to greater wealth and entitlement, while slamming poor children into the dead end of deepening demoralization and poverty" (Maran, 2000, p. 291). We are effectively teaching the youth of America to perpetuate racism and classism. In the academic setting, students are judged first on their outward appearances, and often race is a determinant for vocational tracking, special education, or low academic achievement (Oakes, 1985). Tracking refers to the level of courses designed to delineate between college-bound and vocational education. Lynn (2004) suggested that social scientists should examine the ways in which schools specifically sort students, predominantly of color and assumed lower class, into lower academic tracks.

Oakes (1985) conducted extensive research of 25 schools and their assorted practices of tracking students. Of these schools, 13 were attended almost exclusively by White students. The remaining schools were ethnically and racially diverse, drawing from Mexican American, Black, Asian, and a "scattering of students from a number of other distinct ethnic groups" (Oakes, p. 65). Oakes found that in English and Math classes of the "mixed schools" (p. 66), students of color were disproportionately placed in low-track classes in comparison to their White counterparts. Thus, students of color who graduated from one of the junior high schools in Oakes' study were less academically prepared for college-bound course loads than their White peers.

Acting White. The following quote demonstrates the concept of *acting White*, a term that is used in retaliation against a person who is perceived to be acting against his or her race, in this case, acting with intelligence:

> A lot of the other kids at the hotel made fun of us 'cause we didn't use drugs and wanted to make in school. They called us wannabe whites (Keisha, age 16, speaking of living in a hotel for homeless people). (quoted in Bode, 1991, p. 15)

Despite the internal tracking and deficit-thinking programs found in American public education, students of color are successful in overcoming the odds. However, once these students beat the academic system, they then must contend with their peers. In a study of 141 Black, male college students, Campbell and Fleming (2000) found that a persistent "fear of racist reprisal as a result of success was a strong component of black male success fears" (p. 14). Fear of success led many of these males to reject the academic setting all together, engaging in poor student habits (Campbell &

Fleming, 2000), focusing on athletics or extracurricular activities (MacLeod, 1995; Maran, 2000), or deliberately ignoring or hiding their academic abilities (Suskind, 1999).

When students of color do succeed academically, they are told they are "acting White" (Ogbu, 1986), a phrase that suggests that academic success and achievement are linked to White power and privilege. Academic achievement then becomes a source of alienation and shame for some students and may cause them to avoid following a course towards higher education. "It may be that holding anti-white attitudes detract from expending effort if academic success is perceived as something white" (Campbell & Fleming, 2000, p. 15). However, the same alienation due to academic success experienced by some students leads to a developing sense of belonging for others. Datnow and Cooper (1996) found that Black students who felt marginalized by the school found strength in numbers, forming culturally or academically based peer groups that offered positive racial and academic identity. In this instance, acting White meant not participating in Black social life, and "acting cool" was being smart (Datnow & Cooper, 1996, p. 64).

Education

In a letter to the editor of *Education Week,* Sharp (2005) wrote, "The real culprit, which continues to be immune to 'educational reform/racial equity' issues, is social class." The immunity raised in Sharp's letter is essential to understanding the final constitutive element of social class in this analysis, education. The distinction

raised by the question of immunity is one not of reforming the system already in place, but rather identifying the piece that is always overlooked, students' social class experience. "Education does not break down social barriers, but actually strengthens them" (Spangler, 1979, p. 34).

Despite the hope of equalizing opportunity for all through education, systems of reproduction and stratification (as demonstrated earlier in the paper) are still very much alive. Bowles and Gintis (1977) argued that the education system reproduces inequality because children from the privileged class will always have more: more access, more resources, more support, and more money to garner better schooling, which in turn provides them access to more—and the cycle continues. Unique to education as a class barrier is the question of opportunity and the belief in egalitarianism. Spangler (1979) wrote that contradiction of the egalitarian myth is rooted in education; that is, opportunity is available equally to all. However, systemic classism and racism run rampant in schools, "reinforcing the social positions of minority, poor, and working class students" (Virtanen, 2003, p. 448) and exacerbating preexisting issues of social context. "Poor children bring many problems to school that more affluent children usually avoid, all of which affect their readiness to learn and their ability to take advantage of what they are taught" (Hochschild, 2003, p. 827).

Deficit models. Historically intended to be the "great equalizer" of the American class structure, educational institutions instead stand in judgment of student potential based on deficit models and assumptions of at-risk status that ground

opinion in race and class attribution (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2000). Brandon (2003) wrote about the application of deficit-thinking terms such as *at risk, culturally deprived,* or *disadvantaged* as labels that are assigned to students along with the assumption of poor academic achievement. A deficit-thinking model serves as the foundation upon which structural inequality is reproduced in society and now in the educational environment. To place blame on a student's social context, his or her experience in an underclass or minority population, predestines each student to internalize victim ideology, a sense of hopelessness, and as such probably failure to succeed academically.

The process of "blaming the victim" predetermines a child's place and ability in the classroom. Brandon (2003) personified deficit thinking in an example from her first teaching experience in a class consisting of poor students of color. One student in particular, Billy, struggled to write his name after 6 months of school. Frustrated, Brandon finally squatted to look him in the face and, arriving at his level, discovered he was cross-eyed. Brandon wrote, "Apparently, he was to me at the time just a stereotypical metaphor for a monolithic, disadvantaged social group. I assumed his disadvantage, rather than my racism and my lack of attention to his real needs" (p. 34).

Standardized exams. Standardized exams, either those mandated by states under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002) or entrance exams for application to higher education such as the ACT and the SAT, reinforce educational inequality. "Gatekeepers of America's meritocracy—educators, academic institutions, and

employers—have used test scores to label people as bright or not bright, as worthy academically or not worthy" (Sacks, 1999, p. 5). Higher education currently relies on a student's score on standardized exam as a quantifiable measure of intellect, achievement, and academic promise. Standardized test scores, a key component of a college application, do not take into account the individual learning or testing styles of students, the influence of social context and cultural advantage, or the lack of correlation between high test scores and achievement in the college setting. A high score on a standardized exam not only affects the acceptance of a student to elite institutions of higher education, but also may secure the provision of a merit-based scholarship.

"The lower the socioeconomic status, the lower the scores," wrote Rubin (1992, p. 127). Studies prove the test does not accurately predict a student's future success in school or his or her intellectual capacity to learn. Instead, test scores identify:

> Recent data show that someone taking the SAT can expect to score an extra thirty test points for every $10,000 in his parents' yearly income. In a U.S. Department of Education examination of the backgrounds of students who made the SAT cut (a minimum score of 1,100 for highly selective colleges, fully one-third of these high scorers came from the upper-income brackets; that's compared to well under a tenth of high SAT scorers who emerge from the lower economic rungs. (Sacks, 1999, p. 8)

If higher education continues to use standardized exams as representative of student achievement and academic promise, the process of advantaging those born into privilege will continue.

Education as a barrier to higher education opportunities. According to McDonough (1997), approximately 62% of graduating high school seniors enters one of 3,600 colleges and universities as first-time, 1st-year students. Despite the seeming success of 62% of students attending institutions of higher education, the number, reported as aggregate, does not tell the story of the students who do not graduate, choose to attend community colleges, or do not attend a college or university at all. What happened to the 38% of students who did not attend one of the 3,600 colleges and universities? Who are these students, and why are they not joining the 2.2 million students (McDonough, 1997) in their peer group who attend high education? These students are members of low social-class groups; they are students of color; they are victims of tracking, school violence, dangerous neighborhoods, teenage pregnancy, and broken promises.

The most pressing issue, according to Hochschild (2003), is that too many students are poorly taught or placed in low ability groups, ensuring that the cycle of "haves and have nots" (R. P. Coleman & Rainwater, 1978) will not be broken. Brandon (2003) claimed the placement of students in low-achieving tracks is due to prevailing deprivation discourses, such as the belief that "familial deficits and dysfunction" (Valencia, 1997, p. xi) are a prescription for inevitable failure in the academic arena. Brandon wrote, "Attitudes and beliefs about the poor and working-class people of color that make up the paradigm of deficit thinking are 'rooted in ignorance, classism, sexism, pseudoscience, and methodologically flawed research' (Valencia, 1997, p. xii) but they will not go away" (pp. 38-39). Students from the

lowest social class quartiles continue to achieve at a lesser rate than their peers in the highest income quartiles. What may be the reason that some students succeed while others fail, and more importantly, whom is failing whom, the school or the student?

Forster (2006) suggested that students from the lowest income quartiles are not among the fall's entering freshman class for two reasons: (a) They are not "academically qualified" as measured by successful graduation from high school, including a specific course load of math, science and language components, and (b) they do not score at the "basic level" or higher on the English portion of a standardized exam produced by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Forster, 2006, p. B50). Forster further argued that the failure of some students to attend higher education institutions is due to the failure of K-12 educational programs to prepare college-ready students. Forster concurred with Hochschild (2003), who suggested that the intensity and quality of the secondary school curriculum, in particular, has the greatest impact on completion of a bachelor's degree, "far greater," Hochschild argued, "than socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and race" (p. 831).

The most pressing barrier to higher education, perhaps, is the aggregate of all five constitutive elements of class. Beyond access to adequately prepared teachers and cutting-edge teaching tools, students who are born into the lowest income quartiles face a series of obstacles simply to arrive at school. "Being poor," according to Fine and Burns (2003), "usually means attending schools that are under-funded, with inadequate textbooks, under-credentialed teachers, too many kids in a room, and facilities that are deficient" (p. 847). The problem of education's "failure" is not the

fault of the institution, the teachers, or the students alone. The experience of education for those students who are forced to "walk the stairs" is an issue that should be shared by all levels of the community. If we do not acknowledge and address the systemic inequality in the United States, how will we take care of the problems in our schools?

Summary

In this research the five constitutive elements of class, in constant interaction with one another, raise and tear down barriers to higher education. The elements of (a) income, (b) wealth, (c) social relationships, (d) race, and (e) education in the aggregate generate a *lived* experience with social class. In the final section of this chapter, the lived experience of class is defined as a culture of class, a model that introduces the implications of environmental stimulus (events, institutions, individuals, or situations) that force an individual to evolve behavior or fail to thrive. The focus of this model is to understand the adaptive behaviors, or the opportunities for adaptation, to prevent future students from falling behind. These reactions to the environment lead to resilient actions and strategies.

Section 3: The Culture of Class

Introduction

Given the history of social class, in particular the use of a predominantly economic focus, as well as the conceptual model of five intersecting elements

(income, wealth, social relationships, race, and class), an emergent theory that reinvigorates the definition of class is necessary. This reinvigoration suggests that class must be viewed from an ecological, or contextual, standpoint. Class, viewed from a purely categorical perspective, loses the breadth and depth of experience at the individual level, experience that cannot be judged against a linear model. This emergent theory of class is founded on the principal that five primary elements engage one another in an organic and dynamic interaction. This organic model of lived experience with class is called the *culture of class*. The model is meant to revive the antiquated notion of categorical class, adding a texture and multiple layers of meaning to the definition of class.

The disciplinary foundations of biology, social psychology, and public and population health are a means of positioning this research, an individual's cultures of class, in the realm of ecological research. Ecological models are a way to explain human interaction with the environment and more specifically to interpret individual reactions to environmental stimuli. In this analysis the *environment* of these models is replaced with the term *class culture* to capture the intersection of the various elements of class, the composition of individual environment, and the evolving culture of resiliency each student develops and experiences.

In the field of sociology, a theoretical model, called *intersectionality*, may explain the interactive or organic nature of the culture of class. Intersectionality is the theory and rationale behind the lived experience of class. In this analysis, intersectionality is used as the theoretical foundation of the experience of class as

contextual, or multilayered, and fluid (Ostrove & Cole, 2003). The theoretical framework that emerges from intersectionality stipulates that below the surface of social assumption and category is a seething, living reality that is defined by individuals. The premise behind intersectionality is to deconstruct the categories, thus dismantling stereotype and bias.

> The concept of intersectionality is often used to grasp the interconnections between the traditional background categories of gender, ethnicity, race, age, sexuality and class. The concept can be a useful analytical tool in tracing how certain people seem to get positioned as not only different but also troublesome, and in some instances marginalized. (Staunaes, 2003, p. 101)

Intersectionality, in this instance, captures both the structure of class (external to the individual this may include institutions or systems of power in a student's life) and the experience of class (internal to the person this includes perception, interpretation, and observation). The theoretical framework of intersectionality provides the researcher the language to speak of class as an aggregate; each individual piece is unique to the formation and retains its shape, but together they form a stronger unit.

Intersectionality, the theory introduced by Black feminist theorists and later used by social scientists who study social deviance and societal bias or labeling, serves the dual purpose of recognizing the inherent injustice of categories and the necessity of deconstructing categories to understand individual experience. The process of marginalization, in particular those practices that encourage one student while simultaneously discouraging another, uphold and construct barriers to equal opportunities and access. The sociological perspective of intersectionality recognizes

the individual-in-context (or categories) and emphasizes the necessity of change, or evolution of historical paradigms.

Defining a Culture of Class

In order to develop a culture of class, the following fields of research are explored, in brief, to identify the interaction of the individual and his or her environment, from three perspectives of environmental interaction: (a) ecological models, (b) social psychology, and (c) public and population health. Based on ecological models identified by the biological sciences, organisms interact with and adapt to their environment to survive. Those organisms that do not adapt to changing environmental stimulus risk not evolving and thus becoming extinct. Within the framework of biological models, these perspectives provide a theoretical framework for the individual's interaction with his or her environment. The choreography between individual and environment is called the individual's culture of class.

The culture of class is the story told of an individual's position in the hierarchy of class categories that dictates how she or he is received in school and predestines the individual to certain assumptive behaviors. The term *culture of class* is meant to summarize the various systems in an individual student's life that shape his or her experiences and growth, the environment. People are born into their social context, surrounded by their family, buttressed by the education afforded them, and molded by the world outside their windows. Each social context is unique to a student and as such is a key component in the successes and failures she or he may face.

Looking beyond the economic values associated with class is the contextual narrative of experience related to the multifaceted influence and impact of class.

The Premise for Ecological Models and Biology

"One of the key insights of the systems approach has been the realization that the network is a pattern that is common to all of life" (Capra, 2002, p. 9). The concentric relationship (overlapping spheres of influences within the biological model of networks of organisms that are comprised of cells, which are comprised of molecules, and so forth) is the basic definition of what Capra has called self-generation or *autopoiesis,* the process by which cellular organisms literally create themselves. If, according to Capra, a living system is an autopoietic, self-generating, network, "then the phenomena of life have to be understood as a property of the system as a whole" (p. 10). The individual organism's growth relies upon the environment, and in turn, the environment relies upon the individual organism to maintain the entire system of life. When a foreign molecule enters the ecosystem, the organism must react.

Social Psychology

The process of living a classed life is best modeled by the work of Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979, 1989), a social psychologist who developed a model of concentric circles to visually mirror the influence and interaction of variables on the lives of individuals. In Bronfenbrenner's model, an individual's thoughts, emotions,

and behavior are the direct result of his or her environment. The Bronfenbrenner model utilizes three levels: (a) the microsystem, which contains primary interactions with family and peers; (b) the mesosystem, secondary institutions such as the school environment; and (c) the macrosystem, which includes global structures such as educational policy.

The Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979, 1989) model of concentric circles or layered influence identifies the influence of environmental factors on an individual's life context. The key idea of a developing context under Bronfenbrenner's model is the idea of layered environmental or social influences that are shaped implicitly and explicitly by internal and external factors. Bronfenbrenner's model also illustrates how social class attributions are reflected in each level of interaction.

Public and Population Health

Public and population health research, based on the much-worn "black box" or systems approach to environmental interaction, conceives of the individual at the center of a larger population or context. Susser (1998, 2004), Krieger (1994), and Link and Phelen (1995) have called for an individual-in-context approach to determine risk factors that then may be extrapolated to the greater population. In the past, black-box or systems-theory approaches to problems that relate to the larger population were judged from a surface-level view; all that was in the black box was obstructed from view or ignored. Following the metaphor of the black box, the content and context of an individual, such as the individual's neighborhood and job

conditions, were secondary to the diagnosis of a problem. The black box has been replaced by models such as Kreiger's (1994) *web of causation*, suggesting that population health researchers now recognize that context of an individual's life is of paramount importance to that individual's health.

Summary

Although sociologists, social psychologists, and public or population health practitioners recognize the symbiotic relationship between the individual and his or her environment, research must continue to evolve, moving from a black-box approach to a more realistic web or network of interconnected experiences. At the forefront of this analysis is the argument that individuals are bombarded by environmental stimulus, as in Bronfenbrenner's model of overlapping circles of exposure, and individuals' success is predicated upon their ability to adapt. When adaptation occurs, the individual changes his or her behavior, evolving in the environment and learning or developing resiliency strategies.

This section serves as a bridge between the literature on class and the methods used to gather individual experiences of class. Moving away from each constitutive element operating alone, the focus turns to the interaction of these variables on an individual's life. A key area missing from the extant literature on ecological models and individual (re)action is the implication of reflection on experience and the cataloging of recognizable behaviors. Moving from understanding to action, researchers first must identify class as a culture, individual experience overlapping

individual experience, and then must focus on how to develop a more salient model. Such a model could incorporate the reactions of individuals who were at risk for failing and who succeeded in beating the odds, whether those odds are related to overcoming categorical stereotype and institutional bias, having inequitable access, or navigating the social class barriers to higher education. The model for understanding a culture of class is presented in the next chapter.

Moving on to Chapter 3

In the next chapter, the research process for this dissertation is explored, and a model is presented to bring together the individual-in-context data into a useful format for engaging education policy. The key to the constellation model is that it provides depth, in the creation myth; it provides breadth, from the individual discussions that elaborate on the creation myth; and it provides a visual representation from the viewpoint of the individual. Ultimately, the constellation does not allow information to be generalized or to be validated against a scientific measurement. The constellation permits individual-level interpretation and recognition, a place to begin a conversation, to explore a pathway, and to build an entire galaxy. The process of generating a life story is never complete; rather, the story "is constantly in a state of becoming rather than being" (Karabel & Halsey, 1977, p. 57).

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN, COLLECTION, AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

This research presents the stories of individuals whose lives and journeys stand out as examples of beating the odds. This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section describes the research setting and sample selection as well as each step of the information collection process. The second section describes the constellation model, a metaphor used to describe an emerging ecological model first to position the individual-in-context and later, perhaps, to place an individual's unique experience within a population framework. The constellation metaphor brings together elements of an individual's life—his or her autoethnographies (the creation myth), detailed descriptions achieved through reflection with a researcher, and photographs that depict individual experience—into a comprehensive, three-dimensional model.

Section 1: Research Design and Information Collection

Background

This exploratory research project borrowed heavily from the interpretivist paradigms to structure the modified phenomenological ethnography. Drawing predominantly from the interpretivist (also referred to as constructivist) paradigm (Creswell, 1998; Crotty, 1998; Denzin, 1978; Guba & Lincoln, 1998; LeCompte &

Schensul, 1999; Mertens, 1998), the methodology employed by this research focuses on the critical construction of individual reality. As such, interpretivistic research faces some criticism concerning the verification of results and the generalizability of findings (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Interpretivist scholars tend to focus their research on "polyvocal texts, or stories told in the voices of many different people" (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 49) as a means of addressing contextualized research problems. As such, the critical nature of both phenomenology and ethnography, the essential positioning of voice and storyteller, is central to this research. The narrative, the individual story that echoes unique experience and survival, ties together the three phases of information collection to generate a critical, ethnographic project.

The phenomenologist focuses on a single concept (in this case, social class barriers), whereas the ethnographer focuses on providing voice to a marginalized group. As such, this research may fall under the category heading of a modified ethnography that employs a phenomenological focus on a single theme of interest at three levels, drawing analytic structure from the work of grounded theorists. Each phase of information collection is designed to return to the story, the creation myth of an individual's journey to higher education. Implicit to each story is the unique strategies for overcoming class-based barriers and negotiating the bumpy roads of a journey hard fought.

The story, in this instance, is a cornerstone and a capstone, the beginning and the end, the outline of a roadmap. The individuals who provide the stories then

become autoethnographers, engaging the researcher and themselves in a fluid process of reinvention and reflection. The stories give way to the collaboration of meaning, the researcher asking additional questions of the participant, seeking thick description (Geertz, 1973; Goodenough, 1981; Polkinghorne, 2005) and depth of experience. The research is then conducting a narrative analysis as well as an ethnographic interview or discursive discussion. The story becomes dimensional; subtle or linear descriptions take form, clarify, and deepen. Finally, the storyteller sets out, once again as participant researcher, with the opportunity to conduct self-reflective photoethnography, both as artist and as researcher. The storyteller chooses and captures the subject, the photos widen the window into his or her life and give shape to the multiple dimensions of the self. The story is the individual is the image. This inductive exploration of a small sample of individual students' lives opens the door for future research on marginalized individuals who are never given the opportunity to share their strategies for navigating social class barriers.

Methodological Research Design

The ethnographic research design draws from a mixed-methodological approach including autoethnography and storytelling, critical ethnographic and meaning-making practices, and photoethnograpy. The approach is inherently inductive and employs the tools of narrative inquiry as well as traditional ethnography. Narratives, as a source in interpretivistic research, are not intended to typify group behavior. Instead, narratives are intended to reflect an individual's

experience within his or her particular context. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggested that in narrative inquiry, the analysis is a conversation between theory and life, interweaving formal and informal inquiry that upsets the traditional balance of research, that is, to state a question and follow up with a response.

The choice of an ethnographic research design is primarily to capture the voice of the participant. Chase (2003) suggested, "When we listen carefully to the stories people tell, we learn how people as individuals and as groups make sense of their experiences and construct meanings and selves" (p. 80). The key to ethnography-as-process is what is captured in the product, including people's "beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, emotions, verbal and nonverbal means of communication, social networks, behaviors of the group of individuals with friends, family, associates, fellow workers, and colleagues" (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 4).

Ethnographic Truth?

Ethnography is a science of discovery. "Ethnography takes the position that human behavior and the ways in which people construct and make meaning of their worlds and their lives are highly variable and locally specific" (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p.1). Often ethnographic methods are criticized for the focus on the researcher as the primary tool for data gathering. Factualists (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999) and positivists (Crotty, 1998; Mertens, 1998) have argued that objective science must be measured, verified, and reliable. When ethnography is used in critical narrative inquiry, as is the case here, the traditional

implications of objectivistic science are set aside for the reflection on individual context. The application of ethnographic methods permits the researcher to discover or uncover individual strategies of success and resilience despite barriers.

Research Setting

The research setting for this analysis was an office for academic services at a large, public university in the Southwest United States. Discussion with the assistant dean and directors who oversee the programs chosen for participant selection indicated that both 1st- and 2nd-year students would be ideal candidates. The use of 1st- and 2nd-year students allowed for both proximal and a distal response to college transition. The decision to use students at this point in their careers was based on Polkinghorne's (2005) suggestion that researchers should consider selecting participants who can both reflect back on the experience of interest and articulate those experiences from a clear perspective.

For the purposes of this research, student participants were selected from 1st- and 2nd-year students who participated in an academic program sponsored by the Dean of Students' office at this large, Southwestern university. The name of the program was changed to protect the identity of all participants. The programs shall be known as Program A. Program A provided opportunities for students from first-generation families, students who are from low socioeconomic backgrounds, or students who have a developmental or physical disability. All of the students who participated to Program A were offered the opportunity to participate in the research

project (approximately 400 students). Due to time restrictions and interest, 7 students were asked to interview.

Selection of Participants

According to Polkinghorne (2005), the term *selection,* rather than *sampling,* better fits the process of soliciting participation from individuals. Polkinghorne wrote, "*Sampling* carries the connotation that those chosen are a sample of a population…is representative of a population" (p. 139). Therefore, throughout the description of the methodology used in this analysis, the student participants are referred to as select participants and not as a sample of participants.

Selection of the participants is based on the richness of experience (Polkinghorne, 2005) and not, as is often the case in quantitative research, the generalizability of the data. Therefore, selection of participants for this analysis focused on targeting a group of students who preidentified for academic services due to their status as first-generation college students, students with physical or academic impairments, or student from low-socioeconomic families. This type of sampling is called "purposive sampling" (Patton, 1990, p. 169) or sampling that provides information-rich cases for in-depth analysis (Polkinghorne, 2005).

Before the students began the writing process, they were reminded of their rights as participants. They were assured that all information provided to the researcher would be treated anonymously and their identity would be protected. As such, each student was asked after providing written consent to select a pseudonym to

protect his or her identity and anonymity. The researcher used the pseudonym for all research-related interactions with the students and referred in all audiotapes to the students by their chosen pseudonym.

The students who chose to participate in Phase 1 of the research, writing their life stories, were asked to join the researcher for a follow-up interview during Phase 2 of the project. Seven students were offered the opportunity to interview; each lasted approximately 1 ½–2 hours in length. Students were asked to provide times they were available to meet with the researcher to discuss their life stories. During the interview, student participants were reminded again of their right to refuse participation at any point in the interview process. They were told that if at any point they were uncomfortable or upset by the information discussed, they could request a break. In the case that a student required additional support, the contact information for University Health Services, Division of Counseling and Mental Health, was provided and the researcher offered to escort the student to speak with a mental health professional (no such instance occurred). Finally, students were reminded that all of the information they provided would be treated anonymously and would be stripped, as necessary, of identifying or identifiable information.

Information Gathering

The data collection phase of this research drew from the work of critical ethnography. There were three phases of data collection in this research design: (a) stories, (b) discursive discussions, and (c) photography. Each data point offered a

descriptive angle of the process by which students completed his or her journey to higher education. Participants were asked to write their life stories, to engage in a collaborative meaning-making discussion with the interviewer, and to photograph their interpretation of their personal social context. The intent of this methodological approach to gathering information was to ensure that the participant was able to share details of his or her life across a period of time, thus preventing a single, "hit-and-run" model of information gathering.

Phase 1: Writing their life stories. Phase 1 began first with asking the initial prompt, "Tell me about your life." Once they agreed to participate in the project, signed consent forms, and chose a pseudonym, students were provided the following writing prompt:

> Given everything that has happened in your life how did you come to be a student at the University? Thinking as far back as you can, you may choose to write on any topic you wish as it relates to your memories of growing up; such as attending school, your relationships with family, friends, and your community, work experiences, your feelings and emotions, your hopes, fears, and your dreams.

The students were told that they would have 1 month to write their life stories. They were also told that the researcher would check in, via e-mail, with them once a week to see if they had questions, had concerns, or wished to talk about their writing. During these check-in e-mails, the researcher might offer some examples of autobiographical writing, if the student wished to see an example.

In the academic setting, students are rarely asked to share insight into how adults can address their needs. This opportunity, to write freely of his or her life, without fear of retribution or judgment, positions the storyteller in the educational

process as both teacher and learner. In a similar process, Bruner (2004) asked a group of individuals to tell the stories of their lives. Bruner admitted to an interest about how individuals structure their narratives, specifically, how they use structured narratives to give "form to the content and the continuity of life" (p. 701). Specifically, Bruner contended that the process of telling the life story lays a foundational memory that guides the telling of life-stories not only in the present, but also into the future. "A life is not 'how it was' but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold" (Bruner, 2004, p. 708).

Phase 2: The discursive discussion. Chase (2003) suggested that questions posed during interviews should focus on "specific, concrete life stories" (p. 84) and not abstract questions that draw out general responses from the participants. Narrative principles of interviewing should solicit a story from the participant and, more importantly, should demonstrate clearly to the participant that the interviewer is interested in his or her experience. The discussions proposed during Phase 2 employed narrative principles not only to follow up on the life stories already written by the participants, but also to solicit yet-untold stories of experience.

The researcher and the student participant-turned-storyteller engaged in what Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 12) called "collaborative storytelling" or the process of mutually constructing stories from both the lived experience of the researcher and the participant. Each of the interviews lasted approximately 1 ½–2 hours. All interviews were recorded for future research purposes with the consent of

the participant. Participants were offered the opportunity to meet for a second time for member-checking purposes.

According to Polkinghorne (2005), the express purpose of interviews is to elicit a full and detailed account of experience, what Geertz (1973) called a "thick description" (also see Goodenough, 1981; Polkinghorne, 2005). During this initial meeting, the students engaged in a cocreation of meaning, identifying themes that appeared in their life stories as well as discussing areas in their lives that helped them to overcome perceived barriers to higher education. The format of the interview in this study was open and interactive. This first interview was meant to be an assessment, cocollaborated upon by researcher and participant, of the journey the student had taken to arrive at higher education.

A second discussion, via e-mail or in person, provided the participant with the opportunity to affirm or disaffirm the themes raised in the first interview as well as offer a finer grained analysis of his or her journey to higher education and how that journey might inform his or her future progress through higher education. In the case where student participants chose not to meet again in person to discuss changes, they were encouraged to make changes directly to the document and to forward the changes to the researcher.

Phase 3: Photography. In the final phase of the research, the participants engaged in self-reflective dialogue, incorporating their initial life stories with the themes identified in Phase 2 into a new life story anthology. The student participants were provided a disposable camera to capture images to accompany their second life

story. They were provided the following prompt to guide the final phase of the research:

> Think of this disposable camera as a window into your life. You have written about your life, you have discussed your life, now show your life. You may take as many photos as you would like but you may want to consider those individuals, institutions, or places that portray your life story.

Student participants captured images of their lives over the winter break. At the end of the second interview, the researcher provided each participant the opportunity (and a disposable camera) to become the researcher through the use of photography. The student were asked to photograph an image that portrayed the following: "What you aspire to either during college or after you complete college." Equally they might choose to photograph what they aspired *not* to be. The photographic portion of data collection was meant to provide the student participant the opportunity to employ his or her own lens on his or her hopes and dreams, thus drawing a connection to the initial writing prompt and providing a conclusion to the pathway premise.

Field notes. This study incorporates both the voice of the participant and the voice of the researcher. As such, memos were essential to the research process of the constellation model to record the voice of the researcher, questions that arose during the process, and the process of self-actualization and reflection. Electronic files were maintained of all written correspondence between researcher and participant, including components of the life story, interview transcriptions and notes, and reflections of both participant and researcher. These files were an important basis for analysis and provided a strong foundation for research validity and reliability. Strauss

and Corbin (1998) suggested that memos are an essential component of tracking the development of hypothesis, theories, and categories. In this research, field notes were invaluable as a source of contextual information, both the researcher's observations and future questions, concerns, and collaborative opportunities.

Coding

A modified grounded-theory approach was used to code of the information gathered for this research. Coding began immediately after the first story was submitted and continued throughout the research process. All coding initially was done by hand and later uploaded into a qualitative analysis software package called MAXQDA. Once all three levels of coding were complete, individual reports were run, per code, across the 7 cases. All e-mail correspondence, field notes, and memos were coded and uploaded into MAXQDA. Three levels of coding are employed in a traditional, grounded-theory approach to analyze qualitative data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998): (a) open codes, (b) axial codes, and (c) selective codes. The modification of traditional grounded theory coding as well as the assignment of codes is described below.

Incorporating an open-coding strategy defined by Strauss and Corbin (1998), general themes were drawn out of the student's writing to inform specific questions or areas of focus during the collaborative, meaning-making experience in Phase 2. During Phase 2 of the project, the student and researcher acted as cocollaborators, teasing out more detailed descriptions of the student's life. During the analysis phase,

the discussion transcripts were coded first for the large, open codes. Then, large themes were separated into smaller, more manageable metaphors or "stars," to develop an understanding of how the student overcame barriers. Strauss and Corbin referred to this as axial coding. Finally, the entire transcript was carefully coded for selective themes, those that identified unique strategies for resiliency.

The open codes. The culture-of-class model identifies five constitutive elements of class that erect barriers to higher education: (a) income, (b) wealth, (c) social relationships, (d) race, and (e) education. Rather than turn to the text for the first level of coding, these five elements were assigned as open codes. The open codes served as reference codes for first identifying the axial codes and later the more fine-grained selective codes.

The axial codes. The axial codes developed in this analysis were the individuals, institutions, events, and experiences in each student's life that resulted from his or her interaction with the five open codes. The axial codes included financial security, working, occupation, and college cost (income); citizenship, cultural capital, and parent's education (wealth); parents, mother, father, siblings, teachers, friends, and social capital (social relationships); language, culture, stereotypes, and racism (race); and testing, academic preparation and educational resources, and parental involvement (education). The axial coding also revealed evidence of environmental experiences unique to the individual.

The selective codes. Selective coding offered a more fine-tuned interpretation of the student's individual behaviors. Selective codes, in this analysis, were identified

as at-promise factors and resiliency strategies, including self-actualization, emotional maturity, and faith. Resiliency strategies were developed from the analysis including.

Summary

Stories evolve as they are shared, either spontaneously or with purpose, but all stories report on a series of moments. In order to create stories, it is argued by some, there must be a structure that includes a beginning, middle, and an end as well as a cast of characters and a plot (McAdams, 1993; Törrönen, 2000). The way stories are structured varies with the individual. Although the event may be the same, the interpretation changes with the experience, context, and vision of the story's creator. McAdams (1993) suggested, "Individuals construct personal myths to connect each part of their lives into a unified, purposeful, and representational whole" (p. 12).

In the next section, the constellation model is presented as a means of analyzing the information provided during each of the three phases of research. The model was designed to bring together the seemingly disparate phenomena in the same way that a constellation in the night sky represents the story and the image of ancient astronomers. The constellation then serves as a metaphor for the context each participant creates when his or her story is shared. Specifically, in sharing his or her story, a student becomes a teacher, sharing key insights into his or her life, experience with class, and struggles to make meaning of the world in which he or she lives.

Section 2: Constructing the Research Analysis

Introduction to the Analysis

The analysis model used in this research was based primarily on a constructivist paradigm. As stated above, interpretivism and constructivsm are interchangeable in the literature (see Crotty, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1998; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999); this analysis is better defined by the act of construction. In Section 1 of this chapter, the research design focused on the principles of interpretation, including listening to individual stories and ideas to develop an understanding of a unique perspective within an individual's given context.

Rather than interpreting the results along a predestined framework, I instead developed a metaphorical constellation, a three-dimensional construction of viewing a problem from multiple angles in an attempt to engage in change and action. This constellation model brings all three pieces of information—(a) the story, (b) the discussion, and (c) the photography—together with the researcher's insights, to create a comprehensive tale of a student's journey.

The constellation model borrows from astronomy. Each role, institution, and individual influence in the story (stars) flows together to create a multidimensional image (constellation) that serves to structure the stories told by individuals to make meaning of their life (Geier & Darwin, 2005). Specifically, constellations draw attention to the "stars" in a student's life. The construction of the constellation's organizational principles is done through the process of telling one's life story. The

constellation model offers a glimpse into how stories may contribute the necessary contextual evidence to develop inclusive and equitable educational policies and programs that address the unique and individual needs of students.

Constructing a Constellation

"Personal stories let others see 'who' we are better than any other form of communication…and allow you to reveal an aspect of yourself that is otherwise invisible" (Simmons, 2001, p. 10). The act of building a story, of uncovering the invisible or bringing to the surface what may be unrecognized, unknown, or unidentified elements, exposes an individual's life. Helping to establish first the raw story and the subsequent reflection recognizes publicly the power implicit to individual myth and story. In essence, the constellation model acknowledges the power of creating stories, specifically the strength of creation myths and self-explanatory rationales. Storytelling then becomes both the emancipatory agent and the structured foundation for future empowerment.

McAdams (1993) suggested that the myth is ever present in the mind of the storyteller, evolving and adapting over time, providing a unity and a purpose to life. However, when the storytellers are never asked to share their, to construct a story that details their process of meaning making, then the evolution of purpose is halted. Simons (2001) suggested that storytelling is an ideal way to influence others, providing them with a contextual narrative of an event to explain a unique set of circumstances, complete with subtle nuances and personal anecdotes . The process of

influencing others and enlightening oneself is central to the rational of constellation construction. In building a metaphorical image of one's life, certain characteristics hang together, reflecting individual resiliency and support structures.

Constellation models are built through a process of writing and reflecting. The metaphor of the constellation, a grouping of stars that have been assigned both a creation story and an image (e.g., the constellation Orion, the Hunter), serves to create a three-dimensional model of an individual's life as well as to generate a model for comparison across constellations. Constellation models are meant not to be a generalization across cases, but rather to open the opportunity for recognition. To create a constellation one first must tell a story. This story then becomes the creation myth, the verbal description of an image. The creation story, a linear device, is then given depth through the identification of the stars that anchor the story, and later, the image that we see. Now, the creation story and the stars create an image with a history, a snapshot of individual experience, from which we might learn how to recognize positive connections, devices, and entailments to link one constellation with another. The three stages to develop a constellation are discussed in brief detail below.

Phase 1 begins with asking the initial prompt, "Tell me about your life," initializing the storytelling process. Rarely in the academic setting are students asked to share insight into how adults can address their needs. The story then serves as both the cornerstone of the constellation, the creation myth of the metaphor, as well as the place and space for populating the constellation with stars.

Phase 2 engages the story in a process of identifying key individuals, institutions, or events (stars) that place the researcher and the student into a collaborative practice of making meaning. In this phase, the storyteller and the researcher review the stories generated in Phase 1. Together they identify key themes, institutions, and individuals that "shine" through the pages of the student's story. Bruner (2004) argued that due to the reflexivity of authoring a story in which one is also the central character, the narrative may create dilemmas of distortions.

The process of collaborative meaning making clarifies distortions and narrator bias through the process of discursive dialogue and debate. The researcher and the student participant, turned storyteller, engage in what Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 12) called "collaborative storytelling" or the process of mutually constructing stories from the lived experience of the researcher and the participant. The student participant is guided by the experience of the researcher as they collaborate on the stars that shine through the lines of text. The story then becomes the individual's expression of self, allowing individuals to engage with key figures and institutions in their lives. "In the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives" (Bruner, 2004, p. 694).

In the final phase, photography, students engage their environment both as participant and as research. The choices they make in regard to the photographs allow them to self-identify their social class and express their context outside the constraint of the written word. Photography allows each student to capture a moment in his or her life as the embodiment of his or her constellation.

The constellation then serves as a proxy for a map or a representative path of the journey each student took to beat the odds and arrive at the doorstep of higher education. Multiple or alternative sources of information are a means of building redundancy into a research design. LeCompte and Schensul (1999) suggested that multiple data sources are a means of confirming or corroborating information provided during the collection phase. The process of internal redundancy is also called triangulation (Denzin, 1978; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In sum, each part of the constellation lends itself to contextual understanding of the whole.

Reliability and Validity

The question of generalizability or verification is often raised as a critique of the use of auto- and postcritical ethnography. Critics of such "fluffy" subjectivity question the authenticity of data born from subjective accounts as well as concerns about the far-reaching potential of such data (Eakin, 1999). Stories are a reflection of an individual's interpretation of a series of events. The way in which individuals construct their stories in Phase 1 or specifically identify the stars in Phase 2 are uniquely personal and independent of traditional methodologies or strategies. It is the uniqueness of storytelling or the narrative construction that is so powerful about this process and as such should yield new information with each interaction.

In their research on grounded theory, Corbin and Strauss (1998) suggested that researcher bias is avoided because themes must reappear over and over again in the research to be included in the final theory. The process of generating a

constellation follows a similar strategy, suggesting that students must affirm and acknowledge any themes introduced by the researcher during the collaboration in Phase 2. Implicit to the research process in this analysis is the flow of information. Student participants met on two occasions with the researcher to discuss the presence of themes, first in the student's writing and later (during the second discursive discussion) in the researcher's analysis. This member-checking process ensured that the student participant identified the themes (resiliency strategies) that were presented in the analysis chapters.

The process of creating redundancy, to cross-check or confirm the accuracy of data from multiple sources, is called triangulation (Denzin, 1978; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Triangulation, according to LeCompte and Schensul, "ensures that information elicited from each key source is corroborated by information from others" (p. 131). The three types of data were drawn from (a) written life stories, (b) transcriptions from collaborative discussion, and (c) photography. The triangulation of data occurred primarily through the distribution of all data collected to the individual student participants, including researcher field notes, transcripts of interviews, and all coding schemata as well as previously coded life stories. The process of providing all collected information to participants is referred to as member checking (Seidman, 1991). Member checks were employed throughout this process to ensure factual representation of student participants.

Limitations

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) recognized the voice of the researcher in the analysis of individual narratives. Specifically, the researcher's "personal narratives of inquiry" may interfere with the information provided to that researcher through the research process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 46). Acknowledging the omnipresence of the researcher in the process of constellation modeling is a key limitation to this research. There is little impartiality on behalf of the researcher who brings to the table his or her own set of interpretations. However, the process of collaboration identified in Phase 2 of the research process does allow for the voice of the researcher to be mitigated by the voice of the student participant.

It may be argued that the use of a small sample of 7 students, 6 of whom were female, does not serve the purpose of generalizing data or, in the school of postpositivism, allow for falsification. According to Polkinghorne (2005), however, in the field of qualitative research the use of multiple participants will "deepen the understanding of the investigated experience" instead of making sweeping claims about the experience of any population (p. 139). In the case of critical, phenomenological research such as this, generalizability is less important than first understanding the individual's treatment of the phenomena in question. Additionally, the limits of a large, competitive research institution that admits elite students might imply a limitation. Implicit to this research is the belief that although general themes may be drawn, generalization of individual experience or the extrapolation of information to the population would be irresponsible and misleading.

Summary

This chapter presented the constellation model, which addresses the lack of student-based insight and perspective in the current body of literature on education and class as well as provides a pathway or roadmap for future generations of college-bound students to use to overcome class barriers to higher education. The three phases of the model are designed to capture the lived experience of class, the process of meaning making as it relates to identifying strengths and support structures in the student's life that may strengthen resiliency and perspective to help students overcome barriers yet to come.

Throughout this project, the researcher's voice is made apparent, as an observer in the collection of field notes, as a structural agent in coding practices, and most noticeably in the discursive discussions in Phase 2. Whenever possible, the voice of the researcher is set aside to allow the voice of the student participant to be heard in his or her own words, within his her own context, and without the friction of researcher dialogue. However, the voice of the researcher is an essential human platform to elicit emotional and complete responses from the student participants. The experience of the researcher was identified early in the research, both in the data collection phase and during the analysis. Cassell (1997) best summarized the voice of the research in a metaphor about doctoring:

> Complete knowledge of the person is impossible…the person is unknowable. The only instrument that comes close to knowing a person is another person. …Doctors, as doctors, must become their own instruments; it is their subjectivity that seeks out the subjective nature and responses of their patients. (p. 45)

While I, as researcher, do not hope to possess "complete knowledge" of the students who agree to participate in the project, I do hope to provide them with an opportunity to be heard and in return find strength and action in their own words. I hope to reflect back to them, through reading their stories as well as participating in a discursive meaning-making process, their own pathways to success. The complete constellation of each student's life provides a visual representation of his or her own unique strategies for resilience as well as a possible roadmap for navigating future barriers.

When we, as researchers and policymakers, step back from the problem of equal access and opportunity, we may find that our entrenchment precluded action. From our new vantage point, standing outside and peeping through the windows provided by individual experience, the problem may become less obscure and clearer. The first step is identifying the stories and, implicit to those stories, the next steps is overcoming deficits and empowering action.

Moving on to Chapters 4–6

In the next three chapters, each student's individual information is presented using the tenets set forth by constellation modeling. The research presented in chapters 4–6 was generated through the three phases of information gathering described in this chapter and in particular through member-checking activities. Student participants share their lived experience with class and education, specifically making meaning of those experiences to empower individual success as they enter college.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS: THE STORIES

Introduction

In this chapter the stories, originally crafted by the students themselves and later augmented by the discursive discussions, field notes, and electronic correspondence, of 7 students who beat the odds are presented back-to-back. The stories are presented in chronological order and have been read, and approved, by each of the original authors. These are the words, the emotions, the hearts, and the souls of these students. They were asked to use the following prompt to begin writing:

> Given everything that has happened in your life how did you come to be a student at the University? Thinking as far back as you can, you may choose to write on any topic you wish as it relates to your memories of growing up; such as attending school, your relationships with family, friends, and your community, work experiences, your feelings and emotions, your hopes, fears, and your dreams.

Some of them wrote two-page documents, while others wrote 16-page epics. They wrote about their lives without apology and with great hope for their futures.

Before the students submitted the first level of information gathering, their personal story, they were asked to select pseudonyms for themselves as well as for family, friends, or any additional proper noun they used in the context of their stories. All names displayed in their stories, the discursive discussions, or field notes have been changed to protect the confidentiality and identity of the research participants. In cases where the students did not change names, the researcher removed identifying

information. The setting for the research, a large research university in the southwest, is referred to as the University to further protect against identification.

The Cornerstone of Culture: The Story

Stories are messy, contradictory, repetitive and tautological, occasionally illogical, and often reflective of the personality of the storyteller. Positioning the key element, the story, as a contextual variable completes the discussion of literature on both understanding the organic or lived experience of class and the rationale for using stories to describe how students beat the odds to arrive at higher education. This analysis explores the relationship of the storyteller to the unique story, exposing the pathway created on his or her journey to higher education. Seeking to present the stories and not to mine each story for generalizable data or inductive truths, this paper exposes the "vicarious testing of life possibilities" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42). This analysis positions itself at the intersection of action and meaning, focusing on the use of narrative as a means of exposing implicit meaning.

Nur

Meeting Nur for the first time, I immediately noticed her enthusiasm. She radiates a quiet confidence, and behind her dark eyes twinkles the spirit of persistence and resilience that sets the tone for this entire project. Nur was not the first student to respond to my repeated requests for participation, sent over e-mail, but her response was uniquely her own. "My name is Nur and I'm interested in participating in your

research project. Please provide me with additional information and instruction concerning the project. I hope to hear from you soon."

When I did reply to her e-mail, I discovered that not only had she already begun writing, she also was looking only for the parameters of the story length. I replied that her story was her own, thus she alone would decide when it was over. Our next correspondence, approximately a week later, included a carefully typed story of Nur's life. In her e-mail she wrote,

> Attached, please find my life story. Please feel free to email me if you have any questions regarding the paper. If it's convenient for you, I was wondering if we can do our first interview this Friday sometime between 1:30-6pm. I am going to be quite busy for the next four weeks with exams, conference, and recruiting.

So begins my experience of meeting Nur and, later, of identifying her resiliency strategies.

I Was Just a Quiet and Shy Asian Girl

In her written life story, Nur's life begins on her first day of school in America. She describes the surging fear she felt as she stepped off the bus for this important day. In this young woman's story I read about two lifetimes, the one she was born to in a small Malaysian city and the one she began, at age 13, in America. Keeping in line with the organization of story into a resiliency narrative, I will begin my retelling of Nur's story in the chronological beginning, somewhere in Malaysia.

Nur was born in a small city in Malaysia to the second wife of a wealthy businessman. Nur's mother married at a young age and, following the birth of her

only daughter when she was 21, was abandoned by her husband. The young baby was given to her maternal grandmother and extended family of aunts, uncles, and cousins so her mother could pursue higher education. “She said I was her good luck charm. She didn’t get into college like right after she took the big exam. Then she got in after she had me.” Nur’s mother left her young daughter to attend college, the first girl in the family to attend college, in a country that traditionally did not value women’s education. Completing her degree, the young woman took a job with an airline in Kuala Lampur, still apart from her daughter.

Nur’s early memories of growing up in her grandmother’s house spoke of the smells of good cooking and the sense of self-sacrifice made by her grandmother.

> She self-sacrificed herself everybody. She has eight kids and she adopted two she works hard to like take care of everybody. And she had to take care of me too, you know, her grandchild because my mom had to go to college.

The household was full of family. Despite the admonishments from her Muslim neighbors, Nur’s grandmother sent her to a Convent School, breaking with the tradition of community schools, because she wanted her grandchild to receive the best education possible.

“My grandmother put me in a Catholic convent primary school, because she believed that I would receive better education than a regular Malaysian school. She sheltered me with love for the first 13 years of my life.” The education, reasoned her grandmother, was better there, because Nur would learn in English, not only in the local Malay dialect’ her education would include subjects outside of basic life skills and religion; and she would also be exposed to diverse cultures. Nur attended the

convent school until fifth grade, when the family moved to the city to manage the failing health of her grandmother.

Life in the city presented new experiences. For the first time in her life young Nur entered studied in a coed classroom in a local school. She lived with her two aunts and her grandmother in a beautiful penthouse apartment until she was 13 years old, communicating with her mother via letters and telephone. Nur's mother, at this point, had divorced her biological father and remarried the man Nur now calls Dad. The two met while working together in Kuala Lampur for the airlines and traveled extensively for several years before settling in the United States.

When Nur was 13, and in response to growing financial strains on her extended family and at the suggestion of her aunt, Nur told her mother she was ready to move to the United States. "On March 14, 2000, my grandmother let me go half-heartedly, because she believed that my opportunity in America will be greater than in Malaysia." Within several months, the young girl obtained a Green Card and a one-way ticket to the United States. She left behind the world as she knew it, including her friends; her successful school career; her aunts, uncles, and cousins; and her beloved grandmother, the only mother she had ever known. Entering the classroom on her first day of school in the United States, Nur commented,

> I could not help but notice other students from across the district. They exhibited high spirit and a crazed self-energy. I, on the other hand, was just a quiet and shy Malaysian girl among the very outgoing and extroverted students.

Leaving Malaysia meant moving into the home of a mother she had never lived with, adjusting to new rules and a new culture, learning in a language that was

foreign, and losing her self-confidence. In response to what she had sacrificed when she moved to the United States, Nur said,

> My friends. And my education, because I was doing really well in school in Malaysia. I think was ranked second before I moved here and then here I was put in ESL [English as a second language] in like remedial classes.

The tenacity and courage that Nur exhibited entering her new school, assimilating to a new culture and living with a new family, and the sheer determination to succeed set the tone for the second half of her story.

Coming to America and Humble Beginnings

Nur's written life story begins, perhaps with some significance, at the start of her American education.

> A vast fear surged through me as I lay a step off the bus on my first day of school in America. My apprehensive eyes were glued to the taller and bigger American teenagers. I wondered if I would ever measure up to my new peers who seemed so different from me. I stepped into my counselor's room like a blank canvas.

Her words echo the depth of despair, fear, confusion, and loneliness she first encountered in the United States. She said, "About coming here? The first time? Oh man. I wasn't feeling…(long silence)...I don't know. I was scared." She was 13 years old, somewhat conversant in the English language due to the years she spent at the Catholic convent school, and among the minority as a Malay girl. "As I walked into the auditorium with hordes of other students, I felt my throat tighten. I wondered if I would ever measure up to my new peers who seemed so confidant."

At the heart of Nur's success those first days in the American school system was a personal promise to her grandmother. "Beyond the sadness, pressure, and stress, I remember the person who'd sacrificed so much for me to be here; my grandmother. After her passing, I made a promise to myself to never let me grandmother down." Nur vowed to herself not to let her grandmother down, to focus on taking good advantages of the opportunities afforded her in her new environment, and finally to do her best. However, "pushing her limits," stepping out of her shell, proved to be more difficult than Nur imagined.

The students in her new school talked in an unfamiliar language and engaged one another with confidence and unbridled energy. Nur referred to this period in her American life as her "humble beginnings," which required her to relearn subjects she once excelled in, such as math, as well as to interact with teachers and students in a second language.

> My humble beginnings began when I was placed in the ESL class. I was already 13 years old, and for the first time in my life, I had to communicate and comprehend in another language. Math was no longer an easy subject for me. While reading the word problems on the overhead, I could feel my eyes brimming with tears. I became profoundly introverted and my self-confidence plummeted. My surroundings felt like a clouded dream.

The ESL classes proved to be one of the building blocks of Nur's successful transition to American education. She recalled laughing when one of the students in her ESL class asked her to spell a simple word because she thought he was kidding.

The experience of being in remedial classes was one that Nur reflected on with emotion both in her story and in our discussion. Her plummeting confidence and introverted behavior, however, did not affect her work ethic or the vow she made to

her grandmother. She credits her fierce determination to succeed for her ability to move from language lab and math lab classes into mainstream math and language classrooms. “Although these classes were relatively easy for me, I still took them seriously. I used the extra time to do my homework after I finished all the given assignments.” The quiet, shy, Asian girl who entered seventh grade and was disqualified from the seventh-grade Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test because “school officials thought that I was not ready or prepared for the test like everyone else” would prove everyone wrong within 2 years. In eighth grade Nur, still in ESL and lab-based classes, passed the TAAS test. She was promoted, without course restrictions, to ninth grade. And so changed the course of her life.

“I started to push my limits as I entered high school.” Pushing her limits, for Nur, meant breaking out of her self-induced shell following her move to America. At home, in Malaysia, school and friends came naturally. Here, in an American high school, the academic piece required more work and making friends was nearly impossible or implausible. In response to a question I asked about the cause of the precipitous drop in confidence, Nur replied,

> I, I couldn’t approach people. I didn’t know how to carry conversation. It was just weird. Everybody would talk to each other…my friends like they speak really really fast, so I would just listen to them. …I wouldn’t participate in class, I wouldn’t raise my hand, or have the courage to raise my hand. I would just listen. I was just quiet. That’s how people would describe me. “She’s so quiet.”

Determined to change the perception of “a shy, quiet Asian girl,” Nur threw herself into social activities, including student council and the tennis team. Her confidence grew with each interaction, as did her handle on spoken English and the

"foreign" idiosyncrasies of American teenagers. The painful shyness and reclusive tendencies Nur adopted during her first few days in America slowly fell away to reveal a bright, intelligent, and confident young woman. Nur acknowledges the role student council played, in particular, in her transformation.

> Student council was my life. I learned so much. I learned how to build projects, I met most of my closest friends from student council, and I like doing the ice breakers. So I would go to camp and confidently do everything cause I know the wording and I know all the moves. …I had good people around me, took care of me.

She equally tributes her metamorphosis to several key individuals that she mentioned time and again in her story as well as in the follow-up discussion. These individuals include teachers who recognized her academic prowess despite her unwillingness to speak up in class; the coach who spent time with her working on her tennis game; and fellow students who mentored her, provided role modeling, and instilled in her a growing sense of confidence.

"My leadership and social skills began to develop after the Fall Convention [relating to student council]. As I attend more conventions, workshops, and summer camps, I began to experience a 'new me.'" Nur spoke eloquently of her efforts to engage her fellow students with a passionate "Hi," followed by a large smile, her willingness to dance the Wiggle-Loo onstage at Student Council camp, and excelling in team sports. In her story, Nur described student council as the "springboard" for her success, presenting her with opportunities to observe leaders lead and eventually allowing her growth as an assertive voice for students, rather than the "shy follower" who first arrived in America at age 13. The crowning achievement of Nur's high

school experience was the announcement of her status as valedictorian. In her speech she wrote of this accomplishment,

> Ladies and gentleman, most of you know that I had come a long way since the day I first came to this country about five years ago. The new world in front of me seemed so intimidating and challenging. I would not have been standing here in front of you without the love and support that I received from so many people.

The Journey to College

Nur's high school experience ended on a high note. Her academic journey represents her hard work, tenacity, and innate intelligence as well as her willingness to ask for help, to push her own boundaries, and to seek role models. In 5 years a young girl from Malaysian moved from remedial and ESL courses to an all advanced placement curriculum. In her story, however, Nur suggested that attending college in America was a far-flung notion for a young, Malaysian schoolgirl. "I never thought about going to college in America. …[I] was just in a little school and I didn't even think beyond, beyond my ah, beyond. I didn't have any expectations. I didn't have any goals." However, her status as valedictorian provided a scholarship and Nur's strong work ethic, and equally strong academic record warranted the admissions letter she received to attend a highly ranked business program at the University.

Nur's first year on campus was filled with social opportunities, classes, new friends, and a young boy named Harry whom she mentored. From the moment her parents dropped her off in the rented van at the dorm, Nur took good advantage of the opportunities afforded to her. Her tuition covered through an assortment of

scholarships and grants, her parents paying for her housing, and a few loans covering books, Nur was well on the path to success. She concluded her story much as she began, talking about the people and the providence in her life that aided her success. Fellow students; "brothers" in her professional, coed fraternity; her roommate; her parents; her God; and her mentors are all named as the source of strength and support. Not once in her written story or in our discussion did Nur speak of trials.

In conclusion I will share from my field notes,

> Meeting Nur. She sparkles with enthusiasm and charm—a well-organized young woman of incredible intelligence. She is kind and generous of her time, despite the many activities and the careful scheduling of her time. Three times during our meeting today she apologized and responded to a telephone call, never spending more than a few seconds on the phone. Her story wowed me, both for the span of her lifetime in the short 20 years she has spent on this earth but also her belief in luck and in blessings. Not once during our 2+ hours together did Nur ever suggest a hint of pride for her many accomplishments, always paying thanks to family, friends, to God for her many blessings. She spoke often of luck, as though her own intuition and intelligence did not carry her to higher education. She is a woman of much strength. I admire her resolve and her attention to detail, her thoughtfulness, and her keen interest in this project. She was the perfect student with whom to commence this journey to understanding. (Field notes, September 22, 2006)

Nur's story is one of incredible resilience. Her sojourn has begun anew on a university campus a few hours from her home, now her second home. One month before our interview, she flew to Europe to visit with a maternal aunt whom she had not seen since leaving Malaysia. She aspires to work perhaps in television. She laughs about learning to play guitar and singing in front of her college class.

John Smith

John's story began with the proverbial question on the tip of every storyteller's tongue. "Where should I begin?" John is impetuous and kind, innocent and funny, but equally aware of his surroundings. His journey did not begin with a description of his own life, but instead, apropos of his deep respect for his parentage, John focused on his family, five brothers, one sister, and his parents. John's parents were both born in Mexico, neither is literate in English, and his father the only one of the pair who speaks passable English. However, the eldest child, John's older brother, attended community college, and now their second born is a 1st-year student at the University. So began John's story, full of the grit of a hard-earned passage, the sacrifice of parental love, and the singular focus of one family on making a better life.

Coming From Mexico

John's parents were born in central Mexico to large, ranching families. Wrote John of his father's education, "My father went to school when he was 7 years old. He only went to school for one year or less than a half of a year. My grandpa just told my dad, 'You are old enough to go work in the fields, start working in the fields.' He was 8 or 9." John's mother experienced a similar response towards formal schooling. She attended school for approximately 2 or 3 years and withdrew to work her family's farm. John's parents were both raised in poverty with little hope of breaking the cycle if they remained in Mexico. When John's father turned 16 he crossed the boarder into the United States illegally for the first time.

> My dad first crossed the boarder into the U.S. illegally, just like the millions of other Mexicans who were in search of a better lifestyle. He was 16. I would be very scared if I was 16 and migrating into a country I had never stepped a foot into before or knew the language.

John's father was caught and returned to Mexico three times before he was able to apply for amnesty. During this period of approximately 5 years, he worked in construction, running automotive equipment and cars over the border, and took any other job that required physical and demanding labor. The money he earned in the United States allowed him to purchase two homes in Mexico, one for himself and one for his parents.

> Yea, it sounds like they had a life. The lifestyle back home is just not very good. My dad already came here to make more money. I mean they all worked, there or here, but its just, it was easier to work here and make construction, more in this society, better conditions and environments.

After he was returned a second time to Mexico by immigration authorities, John's father married a woman he had known since childhood, and the two made one last journey, illegally over the U.S. border.

> When he came back he came back in the trunk of a car, he and some other guys. They were all, like, he had to come back in the trunk of a car and he only had (hold up fingers to show approximately one inch of space) that much for air space.

Arriving in the United States, John's father was forced to pay a "fee" to the men who transported him, referred to as Coyotes. The cost in the early 1980s was approximately $200. Nearly 27 years later, estimated John, the cost is upwards of $2,000.

John's mother and father were legalized (a term used by John) through the support of compassionate citizens in the United States. John's father's boss was

aware of the time requirements, 10 years, to receive amnesty. He wrote a letter on John's father's behalf that attested to the 10-year requirement. John's mother was supported by his father's brother and sister-in-law, by now U.S. citizens, for whom she provided full-time childcare. The process of naturalization was a significant turning point in the lives of John's parents. As soon as they were "legal" citizens with secure work, they decided to begin their family. "If it was not for their decision of moving over to the U.S. I would most likely not be here today."

In the Beginning

In the mid-1980s, John's parents moved to a larger city and rented their first home. John's father worked construction, while John's mother tended to her young brood; she had one baby a year for 5 years. Shortly after the birth of their third child, John's father sustained serious injuries in a construction accident. In our discussion John detailed the event, a story he has heard often over the years.

> He was working [city name] building the skyline. He fell off, like, a 20-foot building. Yea, he fell and when he fell something, because there were two of them, but his partner didn't do something right and they were on a plank or something. He took off or something. He just fell like and lost his clothes, he landed in his underwear. I'm not sure how that happened on a construction site. He just fell and I think his wrist was broken. They took him to the hospital. So that is how he started. That is how we got our house. After the hospital he didn't work for 3 years. They did surgery on his hand but his hand is worse than before they did surgery. They gave him workers comp, that how he was, and he's, he ah, got part of a lawsuit and got like $23,000 out of that lawsuit.

The money from the lawsuit provided John's father with the capital necessary to purchase a small house near the freeway. The family of five moved into the 100-year

old home with no money to spare. In response to his description of this period of his parent's life, I asked John to describe some of the obstacles or challenges they faced postaccident. He replied that he remember his mother specifically talking about their growing family.

> She had three homes that were small. There was always one coming. There was a time when no money was coming in so my mom would have (pause) there really wasn't anything on the table. My dad would have to borrow money. He had no money whatsoever. I remember that.

The family survived. John's father returned to work as a construction worker, and John's mom raised her family with creativity and ingenuity.

Raising the Children

The family of eight lived under the constant supervision and rules of John's father. In John's words, "We were raised in a very old fashioned way. My dad was very hard on us and wanted to always have us under control with us not having a saying [sic] in what is to be done." Strict, according to John, meant that the boys were to go to school, their "jobs," and return straight home at the end of the school day. Extracurricular activities were not permitted. "We weren't even allowed to go on fieldtrips." On the other hand, John's mother was more nurturing, protecting her young family from the "old-fashioned" ways of John's father.

Raised in poverty in rural Mexico, neither of John's parents received formal education beyond elementary school. In Mexico, particularly in rural farming families, it is not uncommon for children to receive little formal education.

> My father went to school when he was 7 years old. He only went to school for one year or less than a half of a year. And my grandpa had fields, they used to plant fields and stuff like that. My grandpa just told my dad, "You are old enough to go to work in the fields, start working in the fields." He was like 8 or 9.

John's mother attended 1–2 years of formal education and was also called home to the fields. John credits his parents' experience of working in the sun as influencing his own education.

> When we came over here, my dad was working construction, and he didn't want to see us working out in the sun. He's always worked out in the sun and that's what he does. Like, "I don't want to see you, we're in America, get an education."

They insisted that their children attend school, work hard, and graduate from high school. "I guess they didn't want to see us in the life that they were raised in, poor, the conditions they were raised in."

However, despite their emphasis on achieving a high school diploma, neither of John's parents is literate in English or Spanish, his mother does not speak English at all, and his father has limited proficiency. "If [Dad] heard a conversation, he knows what you're saying. He doesn't speak correctly or anything like that but he would get his point across. Mom, she's never [learned]." It seems it was up to the children to develop independence early, armed with the example their parents set in coming to the United States for a better life and more opportunity. The language barrier, however, would prove to be a continual problem.

> They never really saw a point of going to talk to the teacher. They were like, okay, why am I going to talk to her, she doesn't know Spanish. My dad never seemed to grasp the whole point of going to see the teacher. Normal parents, they would go to talk to the teachers and stuff like that. I was always behind.

It's American to Talk English

Young John entered kindergarten 1 year behind his older brother. School was John's first interaction with the English language and, in his words, "going into school and only knowing Spanish really held me back." Neither of John's parents spoke English and so were very little help as their young sons struggled to learn the new language. "When I was at my home my dad was always like, 'You speak Spanish at home.'" John's father, perhaps responding to his lack of facility with the English language, required his sons to speak Spanish at home, contributing to the already steep learning curve of developing good speaking skills in the foreign language. The boys struggled with the cultural divide between home and school. "We would always contradict [Dad], like oh, it's American to talk English."

The language barrier was a difficult hurdle for both John and his brother, at times contributing to their struggle with formal education. John attributes staying a 2nd year in kindergarten to his lack of proficiency in English. "I had a hard time developing my English skills since the only place I would ever heard them [sic] as at and when I got home I could only talk Spanish." However, his skills in English improved with each day he spent in school as well as ESL programs and additional outreach programs, including Reading Recovery and speech classes. John entered first grade 1 year behind his age group but with a stronger grasp of the English language and a newfound love for reading.

The School Year

John's earliest memories of school encompass a range of emotions and experiences. He learned to speak a new language, at first haltingly and then with pride, teaching his younger siblings how to communicate in English. He learned to read with the assistance of a program, Reading Recovery, designed to engage young learners first in recognizing words, then sentences, and eventually graduating to small books. "That's what taught me how to read. I had to read sentences and stuff like that. That's when I started liking how to read. And like my second-grade year I mentioned that I got the most books read." The combination of one-on-one reading assistance and the promise of a reward (be it food, a sticker, or praise from a teacher) developed John's confidence as a reader. He spent all of second grade taking home and devouring books. Although, he admitted, he occasionally skimmed them to win the reward.

Reading the books proved to be the first step in John's educational journey; the second was expressing himself in English. At the completion of second grade, John was reading at grade level but still struggled with both writing and speaking English. He was placed in a speech class to improve his grammar in particular. Entering fourth grade, with several years of small-group learning behind him, John was mainstreamed. He also discovered a penchant for mathematics. Recognizing his son's due diligence, John's father suggested that they institute a reward system. For every 100 that John brought home from school, John's father pledged a $1 reward.

The reward system, suggested John, encouraged him to work hard in school, "I was actually trying, you know, because I was going to get rewarded."

John's father never did pay out on the reward system, but John's hard work resulted in high marks. In fifth grade, he received straight As, despite his own disbelief that he could achieve high marks.

> I was like, wait a second, I didn't believe it at first. Is that possible? I think I went to talk to the teachers. Are you sure I got an A for this class? I couldn't get all As. But this is the point where I said, wait a minute, I just got straight As, I am smart.

John's elementary education, already years beyond that of his parents, ended on a positive note. He was succeeding, despite earlier hardships with English and reading, and he was passing his education on to his younger brothers and sisters, who at the start of their educations were tracked into remedial courses.

Rewarding Opportunities

Grades, and the subsequent rewards of pizza and ice cream, continued to motivate John to achieve high marks in junior high. Due to his high grades, John was invited to join advanced math and sciences classes, including algebra. "This really put me ahead of the pack and I learned new study habits which I never knew before." John spoke of the "bragging rights" of good grades, "Everyone who achieved these great grades was put on a list in the hall where everyone could read." The bragging rights of good grades were partially responsible for John's success. He also credits his sixth-grade homeroom teacher with his academic success. She had taught John's brother the year before and as a result had high expectations for John. "So that played

a part in me actually trying to do good in school. My sixth-grade year is when I started trying."

John's 2 years in junior high developed his strong math and science skills, exposed him to teachers that saw in him the ability to succeed, and pushed him to work harder than ever before. He continued to be highly motivated by good grades and the opportunities afforded him as a result.

> My first grading period was tough and I did not achieve all As, but I didn't let this hurt me but instead inspire me to raise my bar. I did push myself that extra mile and I some how receive As for most of the year. These rewards were the foundation for my successes that I have come to achieve.

Proving himself a hard-working and intelligent student in junior high, John was placed in advanced classes at the beginning of his high school career. "In high school I was assumed to be smart. Like, oh, you're smart because I was taking that class with the sophomores. I was labeled smart so like okay, I'm smart, I'm supposed to be smart." Outside of the classroom environment, John's father influenced his children's pursuit of education.

> "Study hard and earn a degree so you can work inside an office and not in the hot head like I have done all my life." This quote was told to me many times over and over which I know played a role in where I man today.

John's father shared these sentiments with his children daily, in spoken admonishments about working hard in school as well as in practice, when he returned home from long hours at the grass farm. John credits his father for his academic focus in high school along with a visit, his 1st year, from a group of people that spoke to the school on the importance of higher education. The speakers walked the students through the admissions process, specifically highlighting the importance of grade

point averages (GPAs) and class rank. The message sunk in with John. He applied himself to his coursework, still achieving high marks although now in the absence of an extrinsic reward he shifted his concentration to being admitted to college.

During his 1st and 2nd years in high school, John's course load included several upper division courses. The upper level courses were often filled with White students, and John experienced a sense of isolation. "I really didn't socialize with them, most of them were White people, one or two Mexicans. I was the only real Mexican I guess you could say, not in high school, just in class." Advanced Placement (AP) and honors courses exposed John to a more competitive student body and a group that he traditionally did not socialize with outside of school. His sense of isolation might have fueled John's push for straight As, and subsequently the first 4.0 he achieved on his transcript. Feeling like he was not a part of the "group," he worked hard to be smarter than them, to rise above their social clique, a point in his "educational career when I realized I had intelligence." At the start of his junior year in high school, John was in the top 10% of his class, developing strength in reading but still isolated from his classmates. So, he decided it was time to "achieve new things."

Making a Name for Myself

If you should ever meet John walking down the hallways of academia, you will no doubt notice what I noted as charisma in my field notes. He is, without a doubt, a shining example of hard work and persistence. Yet, below the studious

surface one can see the glimmer of a competitive spirit. John is a fighter. He battled poverty when his father was without a job, he battled a second language and a disdain for reading, he discovered his talents for math and science, and then he waged war on his social life. John possessed many friends in school; however, his social circle rarely interacted with his academic world. He was much more focused and, as a result, more academically inclined than his friends. The final challenge that remained for him in high school was to make a name for himself, and he decided to do so by running for class president.

> When I signed up for it, I never thought of actually being President, my purpose behind me signing up to run for President was so that the whole class could see my name on the ballot because I was not a very social person and I just felt that I had to be known by more people.

And so, John ran for class president, and he won. He planned a prom, he ran meetings, and he peeked out and eventually jumped out of his proverbial shell. At the end of his junior year in high school, people knew John. They voted for him, once again, to be their president for his senior year. Finally, everyone knew John's name. The last remaining task of his high school career? Get into college.

Going to College

John's journey to higher education began on rocky footing. He did graduate at the top of his class with a highly successful academic and social record to present to colleges. He did receive admission to several colleges, despite the fact that he did not know about due dates or, more pressing, how he would afford to attend the expensive institutions. John's parents advocated heartily for him to remain close to home, to get

a job working with his brother, who upon graduation from a community college, was making nearly $14 an hour, a large salary in their estimation. John wrote and spoke of lengthy discussions with his father about the value of higher education. For a man with fewer than 2 years of formal education, college was a difficult concept to grasp.

However, when the admissions letters began to arrive and John began talking about his imminent departure, his parents changed their strategy. They worried about his safety, his inability to fit in on a large campus as a minority, and the cost.

> I was talking to mom and dad, and she was like, no, don't go there. They were trying to keep me back. They didn't want me to go. I would always tell them, "No, I didn't put countless hours into studying and taking all these advanced classes to end up at a community college where anyone could get into."

John accepted admissions to the institution that offered him the most financial aid, the school of his choice. He would respond to his parents' concerns with their own success stories, reminding them that they both came to the country without jobs, without money, and without an understanding of the language. And they survived. So too would he, 3 years older than his father when he first entered the United States, armed with a strong academic background and the knowledge of two languages.

John concluded his written story,

> So I feel that it was necessary for me to attend college and get a degree and set a step for everyone who thinks that just because they are minority kids or come from a poor family or even failed a grade, they can't make it a wonderful institution as I had done.

His journey continues as he pursues a rigorous course load in the college of engineering. For John, higher education means living up to his dad's often quoted admonishment, "Get an education, do not work in the fields," getting a good job that

allows him to remain out of the hot sun. In my field notes, I summarized our interview with a reflection on the obvious sense of pride John takes in sharing his story, the examples his provided of the path he took over the many obstacles that stood before him, and the enthusiasm he showed to talk openly about his journey.

Stephanie

Meeting Stephanie for the first time was like meeting an old friend to talk about life. I was a bit early, or so I thought, arriving at the restaurant at 5:45 p.m. for our 6:00 p.m. meeting. There she was waiting. We sat, the music in the restaurant drowning out our dinner conversation. I suggested we head to my office, fearful I might lose her quiet, soft-spoken voice on tape. She looked up at me from the menu; agreed to eat and run, so to speak; and then asked if dinner was on me. I laughed and said absolutely, that is the deal. And she responded, "Oh, well, I don't like other people paying for me, not even my boyfriend." Her words hung for a moment in the air, and all I could think was about this young woman, who gave what would later prove to be 5 hours of her life to talk to me, and she was uncomfortable with my purchase of her pancakes. I laughed and said directly, too bad, that is the deal. We talked a bit further, but that first observation of her pride would carry through the rest of the evening, a constant and reoccurring theme. I bought the pancakes.

Arriving at my office Stephanie began to speak, reluctantly at times, she would stare at her lap or her voice would quiver. I consciously pushed her to what I perceived to be the edge, and then we would step back; I would make a joke or switch

gears to ask about something of comfort to her. Her father remained a mystery—like a well-choreographed dance, she moved around the topic. I occasionally would spar with her, asking indirect questions that stuck to her story, all the while wanting to know what hurt this girl. The funny thing is that from Stephanie shines a certain light of resilience—you hear it in her story, a drive and a confidence that comes from natural intelligence. She is mysterious and mischievous, a girl not-yet woman who learned young how to survive.

She does not trust easily, she does not love easily, but it would seem all she wants is to be loved in return. She is sensitive but guarded, fearful to say too much. She is the essence of what it means to "be at risk" and to come out on the other sided bruised and battered but whole nonetheless. She is a gem. Her lower lip quivered at one point; we were speaking of her success following her "failure." When she spoke of her mother her eyes would grow round and fill with sorrow. I interrupted her to say, despite the fact we had only just met, I was so proud of her achievements. She was incredibly strong and brave—courageous even—to return. Her mother would be proud. She should be proud. And she should know that her story will help other students. Amazing young woman. She smiled in return.

A Fickle Tale

My field notes, most prolific for this student, reflect my amazement. Unlike the first 2 participating students I met with, Stephanie did not seem surprised that I wanted to talk to her; of all of the students on campus, she seemed more interested in

talking through her life. Her life story, self-titled, "A Fickle Tale," speaks of a journey that remains bumpy; but unlike the other students, her hardest battle was not in finding college, but upon arriving, developing a strategy to stay. Stephanie is indeed fickle in her life, in her relationships, and in her choices. Reading her story is a raw and powerful journey through time, where the ups and downs of youth are conveyed without flourish or apology. I first met Stephanie at a Program A function. She is a petite young woman of Vietnamese decent, and her uniquely self-deprecating humor caught my attention. Her story, when it arrived late one evening in my e-mail inbox, began with high school, because as she told me later over dinner, her life began in high school. What follows is a glimpse into her journey.

Growing up Vietnamese

"Growing up I always knew that I should do well in school, not that I 'needed' to but that I should. I knew my mom wanted me to do well, and that was enough for me to just try." Stephanie was raised by parents who were born in Vietnam but left shortly after they married to avoid disapproving parents. They settled in the Midwest, had two children, and then moved south, to find better employment. Her mother was a blueberry picker, perhaps suggested Stephanie, the reason she loves blueberries. Her father opened his own mechanics shop when they settled outside a large city in the southwest. Stephanie's mother found work as a seamstress to help make ends meet, but she catered parties in part to make money but also because of her love and skill for cooking.

When Stephanie was young, her parents divorced due to her father's abuse of alcohol "as well as his financial and communication problems." Despite the divorce, Stephanie's parents remained under the same roof. Her father lost his mechanic shop. Her family of four (she has an older brother) was forced to move in with her father's brother. However, tradition and custom dictate that the oldest boy in a family is treated with deference. Therefore, Stephanie's mother and father as well as herself and her brother each had their own room. Her uncle, his wife, and her two cousins shared the remaining bedroom. Though they lived in the same house, their bedrooms only a few doors apart, Stephanie did not speak to her father. Her mother was and remains the center of her life.

> [My mom] was not like other Vietnamese moms. She didn't force me into piano lessons, sit me on a chair doing math all night, or forbid me from social events. She let me do my thing, whatever it may have been, and I'll always be grateful for that.

Stephanie's mother never attended school in Vietnam. She was the youngest daughter in a family of 13 children, and by the time she was old enough to attend school, she was already cooking for the family and helping run the household. Her mother does not speak English, but she was adamant that her children learn to speak English, to "be American." Stephanie explained, "I'm very whitewashed. I have very few Vietnamese friends or Asian friends at all. And she was very, um, she made sure I was as American as possible. So a lot of TV." Stephanie's mother was not forthcoming with compliments or praise, but she loved her children fiercely and spoke often of their accomplishments to her friends long after her children went to bed. "And this," wrote Stephanie, "is where the story began."

Family

Stephanie's work ethic, in school and in the various extracurricular activities she participated in, stemmed from wanting success for her mom. Her brother never did finish high school, joining a gang early in his academic career and eventually disappearing form the family's life. Stephanie's father, on the other hand, was a ghost in her life. He existed, initially to work, and later to drink with his friends at a local bar. "Dylan and I pass my Dad's car every night when we drive to Dylan's apartment." Her parents did not speak to each other following the divorce, though her mother continued to financially support her ex-husband as well as her children. Stephanie described her mother with awe and a genuine appreciation. Perhaps the greatest lesson her mother provided for her daughter was independence.

> I don't like depending on people. My mom kind of taught me that. She didn't verbally say it of course but ah, she did everything herself. She taught herself how to drive, she drives herself to the hospital when she is sick. She does everything herself. She took care of me and my brother.

Stephanie's relationship with her mother serves as the center of her story. However, always standing in the shadows is her father, a painful and constant reminder of why her mother must work so hard.

Surviving Alcoholism

"Is he violent when he drinks?" I asked. "*Sometimes*," she said, her voice dropping such that she was barely audible. She picked at a spot on her pants where the fabric was fraying. "Well, we, we were never um I don't know how else to say it. He never physically hurt us. It was only mom." Life in Stephanie's home, when she

was young, revolved around avoiding her father, and in turn, he did his best to avoid his ex-wife and daughter. However, the love of a daughter, the memory of a better time, circles around Stephanie's comments about her father. "I rarely saw him. But every once in awhile I would see him and I hate it. I don't want to say I hate my father, but I don't like him at all."

In pushing her a bit further, Stephanie recalled better days with her father, going to local restaurants, but then she quieted, sarcasm her best defense, and suggested that he took her to the restaurant because they served beer. She stifled a laugh sharing this memory and sobered, remembering that her mother paid for the trips to the restaurants. Her smile faded and she shared the memory of the day, in fourth grade, when she stopped speaking to her father.

> My parents got into a really big fight and my mom cried for hours. I couldn't understand. How could someone make someone cry that much? So I think that was it, that's when I decided to stay away from my father as much as possible.

In fourth grade, Stephanie's mother became the only family member actively engaged in her life, and her father disappeared in the darkness. Her lower lip quivered when she spoke of her father, though she resolutely powered through the discussion, not missing a beat or shedding a tear.

Going to School

Stephanie's mother did not outwardly express her pride or her love for her baby girl, but she did employ certain tactics that suggested her devotion to the child. On the first day of kindergarten Stephanie's mother spent the entire day standing at

the back of the room. She stood for at least 3–4 hours, watching over her child, not understanding the lessons, in English, that were going on in the background. “She brought me into school and I was all dolled up. I looked like I was supposed to go to a pageant but she stood in the entranceway the whole time.” She fed Stephanie traditional meals of porridge, while her brother ate his Eggo waffles, and fussed over her appearance, entering Stephanie into children’s pageants. “It was just the one, well, at least that’s what I tell myself.” She was entirely devoted to her small child, but perhaps, due to the language barrier and the way she was raised, she was limited in her ability to express that devotion.

Stephanie’s brother learned English first and helped his younger sister as she entered school. He sat with her, teaching her to read and write and lending her his own textbooks. “He would tell me to read, to jot down everything I saw, and I would try to read it back to him. I think he had to. Mom made him.” A fast and capable learner, Stephanie enjoyed school. She cycled through a series of goals, from veterinarian to lawyer, and eventually in high school, journalist. She joined organizations based not on their purpose but on the presence of her friends, never taking “No” as an answer if there were prerequisites to membership. “Every time I was told I wasn’t going to be in something, I was like okay. But I just managed somehow to fall into it.”

Undeterred by academic barriers, Stephanie made her own path throughout her education. “For me, school wasn’t school until high school. Because everything else was just turn in a paper with your name on it was fine. Basically it didn’t get hard

for me until maybe junior year." Academically Stephanie was highly successful. She coasted through her early education. In junior high school she went through a phase of staying out late, spending time with the "bad crowd" and experimenting with marijuana. However, she clarified, "My first inebriated state was my last." She avoided the alcohol often present at parties due to her father's excessive drinking. Alternately she spent time with the students in her classes, smart young women who encouraged her to embrace her "inner nerd." By the beginning of high school the friends in the "Goth group" were growing more focused on the drug scene, and Stephanie grew disenchanted with them. She moved on to a new group of friends, kids who were likeminded compatriots, members of the band, and lovers of music, her one true passion. Enter Daniel into Stephanie's life. A friend since first grade, Daniel became the touchstone in Stephanie's life, the beginning of her family outside her home. Entering high school, she had a strong group of friends, which they called internally The Posse, and she enrolled in her first journalism class, discovering her passion.

A Series of Disappointments

The Posse was, is, and will be Stephanie's family. As the only woman in the group, she was often treated like a younger sister, specifically by Daniel. "I think I was like 'one of the guys' for the rest of them," an important distinction in Stephanie's life. The boys taught her how to drive, creating obstacle courses in the parking lot at school for her to navigate. Stephanie, Daniel, and a third member,

Dylan, were the core of the group. The remaining members were, in her words, interchangeable depending on the situation. The three came together over a love of music. And then, on October 6, 2004, Stephanie's world would change forever. The day began as most did during high school. The Posse was driving around town, looking for entertainment and perhaps courting trouble. They began discussing their upcoming graduation from high school and talking about possible senior trips during their last summer before college. The story, in Stephanie's words, is as follows:

> We always talked about driving to New York as our senior trip. And I was like, "All right, we need to do this." And Daniel was like, "What are you talking about?" and I was like, "What are you talking about?" He's like, "You're not going…you're a girl." I thought he was kidding. I didn't talk to him the rest of the day.

Several months passed before Daniel and Stephanie spoke again, their words clipped and angry. And most of their exchanges occurred through the often biased filter of another Posse member. He said. She said. And then, the friendship ended because he reportedly told Dylan that he did not care if they were friends or not. "I think I cried for two months straight. I cried on his birthday, I cried on Christmas, I cried on my birthday, because he was, I mean, my best friend."

The journalism course Stephanie took as a freshman gave way to a series of opportunities, as well as disappointments, for Stephanie. Her teacher was a talented advisor who saw the potential in Stephanie and fostered her growth, giving her both confidence and a sense of accomplishment. "I had such a great advisor, who believed in me and guided me through the whole way. I was seriously thinking, 'This is what I

want to do for the rest of my life.'" Sadly, Stephanie's trusted advisor was replaced by a woman with less competence.

> She was thrown into the position because she just wanted a job. She was there to teach English and they threw the journalism stuff at her and I just hated her. She loved me though which made it hard to hate her so much but she had to love me because I was the paper. So, after so long, she made me hate the paper.

Suddenly, journalism, her editorship of the school newspaper, and Stephanie's entire academic trajectory seemed less exciting.

Going into her junior year, in her words, she had just "given up her dream and now she needed a hobby." Ever fickle, Stephanie once again switched gears, turning towards a possible career in culinary school and, in the spirit of entrepreneurship, selling homemade cookies at school.

> Culinary school just sounded so fun. You know? And I wouldn't have to take math or something, or writing classes, I wouldn't have to use them in my entire life. College was just, you know, school. I think. Junior year I think is probably was when I was having the toughest of, just academically, and I was just like, "I can't believe I'm going to possibly have to start paying to do all of this." So culinary school just seemed fun.

During this time she started working at a department store, long hours, sometimes full time during the school year, making money and enjoying the respect and responsibility afforded to her by the store managers. They told her she had a future with the company. "[My friends] of course laughed at the idea. They kept saying I wasn't adding up to my potential. I didn't care. Being a retail store manager really appealed to me." She enrolled in accounting classes at the high school, she joined University Interscholastic League competitions, and she focused on something other

than writing. “I couldn’t have been any cooler. Anyway, it was fun though, while it lasted, but soon so I turned all my focus back onto retail.”

Despite her best efforts, Stephanie could never completely distance herself from the writer inside. It did not take long for her to return to the journalism room, to return to the position of editor of the newspaper, and to resume her duties as a journalist. College was not on her radar until a classmate suggested that she have a secondary plan, in case her quest to be the youngest manager of the department store did not pan out. Stephanie agreed. All she had to lose, she reasoned, was the $50 admissions fee. Because of hard work in the early half of her high school career, Stephanie carried a high GPA and her recent additions of extracurricular activities rounded out her application. She was accepted. “When I got into [university] it was relieving, it was daunting, it was scary, it was heartbreaking, it was, everything, good and bad.” And now, the reality, Stephanie was going to leave home, leave the life she had known, leave her mother, and leave her friends.

This final stage of her developmental years, the beginning of which saw the loss of a close friend, and the later half that found her questioning her future, her career options, and her life, left Stephanie somewhat skeptical of her future. She was bruised and battered from dealing with the questionable ethics of her journalism teacher. She was wounded from the loss of her best friend, a man who did not know that he represented the family and the approval she always wanted. She went back and forth with the decision to attend college, “Pros, it’s University, it [has a lot of live music], it’s just freedom. Cons, it’s a new city, no steady job, no friends, and just

freedom. The freedom appealed and frightened me." After losing Daniel, Stephanie turned to the other founding member of the Posse, Dylan, for support. Their friendship grew. Dylan fell in love.

The summer before leaving for college Stephanie's world was once again challenged. The people who loved her told her to stay. Her mother suggested she attend a community college, motivated by the cost of attending a larger university, and her friends suggested she attend the local college, and her heart prevented her from going to the university close to home because Daniel would also attend classes there in the fall. She went back and forth, weighing her options. She went to orientation at the University. Despite herself, she grew to love hating the city and the University. She left home in early August with a heavy heart, knowing she needed to get away from the chaos of her home, to try something new, but knowing too all that she was leaving behind.

Stephanie's best friend from home also accepted admission to the University, and, with the girl's father, they drove to the University together. Saying goodbye to her mother was exceedingly difficult.

> She held her composure and I held my composure. It was early in the morning. I said goodbye and ran away. She, I don't think she slept at all that night. I think she sat on the living room couch all night.

The young mother, who stood by her daughter's kindergarten room door all day, once again sat in vigil for her daughter's departure. Dylan said goodbye to her with a DVD, a gift that would be the final straw for Stephanie's tentative grip on her

emotions. She knew, only after arriving at the University, that all along, she loved Dylan too. And now she was far away.

> I missed him so much, I hate myself a lot. I couldn't understand why I did this, why I moved 3 hours away. Everyday sucked. Everyday. I hated seeing my roommate, I hated hobos, I hated everything about [city] and ah, I was just this really unhappy person.

'Cause I Know I'm Going to Do Better

College proved to be an enormous challenge for Stephanie. Leaving behind her mother, her friends, and all that was familiar left her spiraling a bit out of control. Surviving, academically, that first semester is remarkable. She has yet to share her experience with her mother, rationalizing that to disappoint her would be far too painful, and, "Well…because I know I'm going to do better." Her first semester away from home, Stephanie focused on missing home. Her new boyfriend stayed behind, in [City], with the rest of the Posse, and the University did not feel particularly welcoming.

> The weather, the people, the campus, the professors, I hated them all. I cried every morning and every night. I missed [home]. I missed it so much that I came home every weekend, literally. And before soon, I wasn't even waiting for the weekend, I was visiting home on Thursdays and Wednesdays. By mid-October I was failing all of my classes except one.

Over the course of her first semester in college Stephanie alienated herself from her professors, her peers in Program A, and her roommate. She spent increasingly longer stretches of time at home and less time thinking of the mounting work at school. She recalled a conversation with her Rhetoric professor, a core writing course for all 1st-year students.

> The teacher e-mailed me and was like, "Stephanie, you are doing really well in my class but I'm going to have to drop you if you miss any more class." So I told him, "Well, I'm planning to, ah, miss one more day and I know, I mean, it is early September, I know I'm going to miss another day." So he was like, "Well, is this it?" And I told him how much I like his class, I really did. And I couldn't, I just couldn't do it. And I apologized and I said "Well, this is it."

Stephanie returned to her room to cry. She spent a great deal of her time at the University crying. Not only was she separated from her best friends, the only family she had ever known, but she was failing her mom by failing herself. When she returned home to her family for Thanksgiving break she knew she had little hope of passing any of her courses. Yet, her eyes remained dry for the first time in 4 months.

She met with her advisors, she talked to her boyfriend, and yet Stephanie spoke of the profound aloneness she was experiencing at the University. She returned home for winter break to assuage the sense of aloneness, but instead of finding reassurance, she faced her own demons. Home was not a pleasant place to be. Her father was around. Her relationship with her mother was strained because of the academic elephant in the room (her mother still does not know the true story of Stephanie's first semester in college). But most of all, the alternative to the University meant returning home a failure. "This is when I was really worried and just ashamed and embarrassed." It meant attending the local community college, finding work at the local mall to sustain herself and repay the scholarships and loans from the University, and, mostly, losing her pride.

> I couldn't, I couldn't imagine coming back to [city]. I didn't want to be one of those kids who couldn't make it in the real world. They had to come back and live with their mom and work at the mall or [an amusement park]. I couldn't do that…couldn't do that.

So Stephanie approached her college education with new resolve. However, before going back, she had to face the possibility she would not be welcomed back.

Stephanie's transcript arrived at her house during the winter break. She earned three Fs and one X. Ultimately, it would be the X that saved her academic career. At the University, a student may return to school if she or he did not fail 12 or more hours. Stephanie's economics professor gave her an incomplete, an X, that would eventually change to an F if not completed.

> My friends thought it was funny. I had a 0.0 GPA. And then it got a little depressing. I was like, I don't understand. Am I even a student anymore? It was kind of hard to get in touch with your academic advisor during winter break, but, we finally talked and she was like, "Well, you're still a student, you still have class and all this stuff, but you're on probation."

Stephanie responded immediately. She knew, as she said, that to stay in school she would need to visit home less often. She would need to find tutors. "I knew I was in trouble, but the kind of trouble where everyone was just really willing to help."

And so, Stephanie created a "to-do" list that included making friends, making good grades and studying more, and discovering the University and surrounding city. She vowed to find the good in her opportunity rather than to focus on the bad, that she had to be far from home. At the end of her second semester in college, Stephanie earned a 3.2 GPA, raising her 0.0 to a 1.78. She made a friend of her economics and calculus tutor.

> In my head I was like I can only do better than what I did. But at first everybody was telling me, "You have to get all As," and I was like "What?" They were like, "You can only get out of academic probation if you get a 2.0 and you are starting at a 0, so you have to all As." I was like, "Okay, I don't think I can manage that," but I was...okay.

She was. Stephanie continued to seek support, swallowing her pride and her cynicism, turning to the people around her who cared for her well-being. She spent her first summer home, with her boyfriend, enjoying their time together and looking forward, for the first time, to her return to the University. She changed her focus from journalism to a possible career in social work, attesting to the title of her story, "A Fickle Tale." Since her fateful beginning, Stephanie has discovered the town, made new friends, and attended all but a few of her classes. She has completed her "to-do" list, with her own flare for the dramatic.

In the end, Stephanie's journey through life resulted in a complete circle. She returned to the University for the spring semester stronger and focused. She had found love, a journey she might have embarked upon because of her childhood, or perhaps she was seeking acceptance, not from others but from herself. No matter her path, Stephanie's sojourn resulted in peace. Later, after writing her story and meeting with me to discuss it, she would return to Daniel to discuss their fight. In an e-mail to me about their discussion she wrote,

> The night before Thanksgiving, Dylan and I had a small get together at his apartment, and Daniel was there. I brought up the life story project and he kind of got mad. Mostly because it's in writing, MY account of the story, which I still argue is the TRUE story. He tells a different one, the wrong one. The "talk" escalated into a yelling match basically and it went back and forth. I guess we cleared some pent up angst and whatnot, our friends broke up the 'fight' and we half-assed hugged each other. Later on, the 'get together' moved to Daniel's apartment, and after he played a few rounds of beer pong, he found me and we continued the talk. I was apprehensive because I didn't want to hold a serious conversation with a drunken Daniel, but he told me he wasn't that drunk. This time around the talk was a lot more emotional and comforting. We cleared the air and accepted each other's apologies. And I guess that's it. It was a long night. Anyway, everything else is fantastic.

When I first met Stephanie, she was explaining to me, over eggs and pancakes, why she chose the tattoo she had on her arms, and why she was so fickle. In hindsight, I see a young woman who very much wanted to feel safe to be herself, who felt sometimes that the shadows consumed her, and who never acknowledged her innate intelligence. After reading this, I hope that she may one day soon look in the mirror and say to her reflection, "I am amazing." Then, perhaps she will forgive herself for all of her perceived failures—especially the sadness she experiences when she thinks of how she nearly let her mother down.

Michelle

Meeting Michelle for the first time, I was immediately struck by her personality. She was bubbly and relaxed, joining me in my office for our chat. She chose her words carefully, sometimes pausing reflectively midsentence to find the perfect phrase to describe the situation.

Insolvent Lives

Michelle's story began with her family, a nod to the important role they play in her life and throughout her account of childhood. Her parents were born in the "depths of Mexico," a phrase she used to describe the desperate poverty often unseen by the tourist's eye. In our discussion she elaborated,

> Usually, when people think of Mexico, they think about the food, the beaches and the beautiful pyramids. But by depth, I mean what people can't see-what's left out. I remember when I'd go to Mexico (Nuevo Laredo to be exact) I would see kids my age in dirty clothes and selling bubble gum. On several

> occasions, I saw a woman in a wheelchair without an arm, begging for money. I would see all these things and think "You know, people don't take pictures of this and put 'Mexico, Take a Trip Here.'" That's what I mean by depth: what people usually never see…and that's where my parents were born, the depths of Mexico.

Michelle's mother taught her kids humility through stories of her childhood, such as her memories of raising her seven siblings on a single can of beans. Once, when Michelle's mother (then a child) burned a can of beans, Michelle's grandmother slapped her for her mistake, telling her that the can of beans was worth a week of work. "I really appreciated everything she did for me throughout my life." Michelle's father also shared stories of walking to and from school everyday, urging his children to be thankful for the family car. "In the middle of any drive, he'd randomly say, 'You know, I was never able to drive around in a car like this when I was your age.'"

Michelle's parents, born to abject poverty, both escaped their childhoods for a better life in the United States.

> My dad's first job was picking up animals from the street, but he kept working, and little by little, began making money. Even though my mom didn't have her education, she still got different jobs just to be able to support us.

Her father began working for the state department of transportation, picking up the carcasses of dead animals, working his way up to a managerial position before his retirement late last year. Michelle describes her mother's career path:

> She never really got a set path because she's so diverse and doesn't like to be in one spot. So she just has a bunch of different jobs—she's a tenant, she's an aerobics instructor, she's a teacher aide for special education, she sings with the church choir, she's an everything you can say a "super mom."

Together, Michelle's parents worked hard to establish themselves and went on to have six children. "It's because of my parents' backgrounds...I realize all the struggles they have endured that I try to achieve a successful life."

Learning to Love Dad

Michelle's father's abuse of alcohol, early in his married life, proved to be a nearly insurmountable obstacle to the family's happiness.

> For most people, their home is usually "home sweet home." But at my house, it was really tense all the time. When my dad would come home from work, the house had to be perfectly clean, we'd all have to be quiet cause anything could trigger him. I could be sitting down coloring and he'd find a reason to yell at me. My mom was the one who was our savior; she was our fun. She would take us to the pool in the summer, and was the one who prevented us from getting too emotionally distressed by our dad.

When queried about her father's battle with alcoholism, a disease he eventually would conquer, Michelle spoke frankly. She recalled questioning her faith in God as a child, wondering,

> If there is a God, why does my dad treat me like this? Why does he make me hurt inside? Why can't god stop my tears? I had the idea that God was supposed to protect everyone, so right before I knew he was going to hurt me somehow, I'd think in my head about God preventing it, but he never did.

Her earnest description of dealing with the family's battle against her father's drinking habits, her mother's ability to keep them all together, and her own journey of forgiveness set this young woman apart both for her "old soul" as well as her acceptance. Michelle loves her father. It is clear in the way she describes him and with her credit to both of her parents for attending college. However, her childhood

was shadowed by her father's drinking; though he never lashed out at physically at the baby girl in the family, he left deep wounds in the family.

Unlike her older siblings, Michelle never felt the sting of her father's hand. However she did experience his emotional cruelty.

> The older children got physical abuse, and the young three, which is me and my two brothers got the verbal abuse. My sister tells me she'd get hit for no reason sometimes. I remember my dad insulting my mom if she didn't do something right. I remember him not being very understanding of our innocence as children. It's like he couldn't understand that children make mistakes and they don't deserve to be put down for making them. If I dropped a cup of water he'd yell "Por mensa!" which means, "Because you're stupid!" So instead of little things like that being mistakes, I believed there was really something wrong with me and that I actually was stupid.

Michelle's resiliency as a child, her ability to move beyond her father's disease and see the man behind the words, exemplifies her strong spirit.

> That [the abuse], I would say, kind of shaped who I am. I'm very strong now when it comes to dealing with my emotions since I had to start at such a young age. I take nothing in my life for granted, and never put others down. It wasn't easy but I got over what my dad did to me. I forgave him.

Now 60 years old, no longer drinking or smoking, the abuse is a distant memory. Today, Michelle credits the shelter of love and support her parent's provided for her successful acceptance to the university.

My Bed Was Just a Decoration

Michelle's early childhood was spent living in a tough neighborhood outside a large city. The constant drive-bys and drug activity on her street meant that she was rarely allowed to venture outdoors to play or to enjoy the nearby park.

> Since there were always drive-bys in my neighborhood we usually had to sleep on the floor. My mom would lie on the floor with all of us every night and we'd all just say stories to each other. So my bed was kinda just there for decoration.

Her bed on the floor to protect her from stray bullets, Michelle found the silver-lining to the experience, a practice that would come to define our time together. Although a realist, Michelle's approach to the world suggests that she can always find the positive, perhaps the result of a childhood that required the company of a vivid imagination to pass the lonely hours indoors.

> I was never allowed to ride my bike around. I always wanted to. I'd see girls in movies and TV riding their bikes, and I'd think, "Why can't I do that, I want to ride my bike like they are."

The imagery of a small child questioning the validity of her parent's security measures again suggests that Michelle learned early to be creative and self-motivated. The six children shared two bedrooms in that house. There was no air-conditioning, though "we would have 10 million different fans to keep us fresh," and the windows had holes in them, inviting pests and insects to join the family. In describing her childhood home, Michelle never suggested that she resented her childhood. In fact, when asked if there was anything else she might wish to add to fill in the picture of her childhood, she replied, "That was my childhood. It was rough, sure, but you know, I survived it, and I get a feeling of strength in having done so." Pushed further to explain how she survived, Michelle added,

> Well, I guess most kids don't really grow out of it. You know? They're still like, "How could that happen to me?" They're still so revolved around their issues of the past that they forget how to deal with the present. Their whole perspective of the world is bad cause their childhood was bad. But I grew out of that phase in my life and don't see it that way anymore. I know what

> happened to me wasn't my fault. I know I did nothing to deserve it. I know it was chemicals making my father the way he was. But it's accepting it that most people have a hard time with. So I guess that's how I survived it. I value that I was able to go through something like that because it helps me to appreciate what I have now, and it makes me work harder for what I'll have later.

Después de la Lluvia Sale el Sol

Michelle's Mexican heritage is a strong component of her identity. She spoke of her mother's simple, cultural sayings as motivation to be triumphant in her life, a habit she carried into her formal schooling. "Whenever I was faced with disappointment, my mother would simply reply by saying, 'Después de la lluvia sale el sol' (After the rain comes the sun), because it would change my entire perspective and outlook on the situation." This simple Spanish phrased echoed in Michelle's head as she approached tests and academic challenges, overcame disappointment, and was denied opportunities such as membership on the basketball team. "Whenever something would disappoint me, I'd say, I'm not going to freak out. Everything's going to be fine, I know it is because…then I'd hear my mom saying those seven little words."

As the sixth child, Michelle was well prepared for the expectations of formal schooling. She found the work to be fairly easy. "It was like 'Here's a handout, fill it out, turn it in, get a grade.'" Schooling came easily to the bright and inquisitive child. She remembered working hard, understanding the value of a good education, and learning from her parents' experiences; she knew at a young age that education was a way out or a way up.

> I remember that I never gave up in school, at all. I would go to school with fevers and pink eye, even though it was bad, but I wanted to go. Why stay home? Home was unsafe and stressful. I wanted to be in class with a nice teacher and I wanted to get As. I wanted to be student of the month. Inside, I felt I deserved it all, and a little fever or vomit wasn't going to stop me.

Without the constant supervision or involvement of her parents, Michelle worked hard, never giving in to the illnesses, social pressures, or distractions that surround school children.

Michelle found time, after working on her studies, to participate in many social and leadership organizations at school. The organizations she participated in stand apart in her memory as the most influential aspect of her early education. She played in various sports, basketball, volleyball, cheerleading. Once in high school, she joined the League of United Latin American Citizens, Health Occupations Students of America, student council, yearbook staff, National Honor Society, University Interscholastic League Ready Writing, and band. She continued to attend church, achieving the honor of being the fourth female altar-server in the history of her city. Michelle was 7 or 8 years old when she signed up to be an altar server. Her tenacity, confidence, and self-advocacy skills began early in life. Returning to her church years later, Michelle commented on the number of young girls serving on the alter with pride, "I go back and there's tons of girls up in the alter and I'm like wow, I started that. Me? Michelle Jimenez?"

Her hard work and persistence resulted in a 5th place in a competitive graduating class of 537. Friendships, hard work, dedication, these are the defining

characteristics of her early education. Crediting her family, in particular her mother, Michelle spoke of her family's involvement in her success in school.

> It had to do a lot with my family I'd say, 'cause three of my brothers were valedictorians, my sister graduated top 20, and one was salutatorian. They all went to college and were very successful, so I always felt like I had to meet those standards. That was a lot of my motivation, being able to prove to my family, hey, just because I'm the young one doesn't mean I can't do as good in school.

The influence of her siblings, her mother's own educational journey during Michelle's elementary school years, and her father's dismissal of education raised Michelle to be the precocious, bright, giving, and disarmingly charming woman that entered high school at the top of her class.

Being Different: A Sense of Diversity

Michelle spoke often about her experience as a Hispanic female, her cultural identify, and her experience with stereotype and overt racism. She extolled the virtues of diversity in the classroom, specifically the importance of learning from one another.

> Imagine if this school was just all White, how it once was. There would be no way to learn or develop from others who are not like you. You wouldn't be exposed to other perspectives and different points of view and unique life stories. So Hispanics bring that cultural type of environment where we learn through each other's past experiences and appreciate having each other as a way to learn about differences in society and customs other than our own.

In her story, she summed up who she is with a single sentence: "My heritage, family, and personal values have each taken a spin in shaping me into the person I've become." What she did not include, perhaps intuitively, is her individual experiences.

In high school Michelle experienced overt racism and transparent bias, an experience that would play a large role in shaping her sense of social justice.

As a sophomore in high school Michelle was involved in the student council at her high school. The position of leadership in her school presented her an opportunity to volunteer as a tutor for math and English. After signing up, she went to visit the tutoring office to ask details about the tutoring experience. She was sitting in the waiting area outside the secretary's office when she overheard her say, Michelle Jim-enezzzz; "She said it like that, with an exaggerated mispronunciation and said out loud, 'She can't possibly be a good English tutor.'" Shortly after she overheard the secretary mispronounce her name and infer, because of her Hispanic surname, that she would not be a successful English tutor, Michelle was face-to-face with the woman.

> With a really rude tone and mean stare, she slowly asked me, "Are you really interested in being an English tutor?" I confidently said, "Yeah." And she was like, "Do you speak English fluently?" She was asking me these things real slow and giving me a face as if she was somehow superior. She was treating me like a child.

Michelle, a member of several prestigious organizations, a successful student and school leader, was treated with indifference. "One of the worse feelings in life comes from being underrated by the color of your skin or the origins of your last name." The secretary finally agreed, with a sigh, to sign up Michelle as a tutor for both English and math, but did so with an obvious roll of the eyes. This experience, coupled with several other instances in her early academic career, encouraged Michelle to prove "Hispanic success to others as a top goal." So began her journey to higher education.

We're All Self-Motivators

Michelle's parents inadvertently played large roles in their children's access to higher education, although for distinctly different reasons. Michelle's mother attended formal schooling until junior high school, leaving the classroom to find a job. After her first son entered college she decided to return to school and complete a General Equivalency Diploma (GED). Michelle recalled helping her mother with the practice tests she would study with. She also recalled her mother raising the challenge to her daughter, "I got my GED, now I know you can do way better. You've been through grade school, and can be anything you want to be." Michelle's mother clearly held her children to higher expectations, supporting their education, wishing for them a better life. In response to whether the lack of formal education held her mother back, Michelle replied, "It did, it really did. Because I think she could have done a lot more with herself, career wise." Her mother's lack of training, her inability to speak fluent English, and her tender support served her children well.

The value of education was rarely a topic of discussion with Michelle's father. He spent a few years at a community college, studying math, before he entered the work force full time to provide for his wife and family. "So back then college wasn't really like, we have to go, it was more like get a job, start making money." Around his children, Michelle's father supported the "bootstrapping" practice, suggesting that if any of the children wished to attend college, though he did not support the concept of college, they would each be responsible to pay the bill. "He thought all of his children were going to be like him. You know, not go to college, get some random

job, make money as fast as possible. He didn't see how books could possibly be better than manual labor."

With the challenge set by her father, the self-motivation they learned from their mother as well as her unflagging support, all five of Michelle's siblings attended or are attending college. Three of her brothers are medical doctors, her sister is a nurse, her youngest brother is studying chemistry in college now, and the youngest, Michelle, just entered her 1st year of college. The cost of college on their shoulders, each of Michelle's siblings found a way to afford tuition. Several took out loans, one received scholarships to cover the cost, another worked before heading to college, and Michelle received several scholarships but still turned towards loans. Without a complaint or a suggestion of frustration, Michelle accepted her fate along with her siblings, taking out school loans to finance her education despite her father's lack of support. "For some reason all my brothers and sister, we're all self-motivated. We don't need to be pushed by our parents to work harder in life."

Arriving at Higher Education: Strong Values and High Aspirations

"Strong values and high aspirations are what fill me inside and motivate me to work on the outside." Michelle's story, her journey to higher education over the rocky terrain, began in the dangerous streets of a crime-ridden neighborhood and ends with a woman on a mission.

> There were a lot of setbacks wanting to come to the University. My dad retired and my mom didn't really have a high-income career. So I thought, okay, how am I going to pay for this. So I applied to like 10 million scholarships throughout senior year and junior year. I kept applying and applying. I actually got a lot of

> scholarships but it still wasn't enough. So now I'm taking out loans to be able to afford everything.

Arriving at the University, Michelle continued with the band, playing clarinet at national football games as well as enrolling in courses that would challenge her mentally. Her goals of attaining a degree in business stem from what she called "the willpower of a courageous young woman to advance the impressions Hispanics leave on others and will help those struggling in achieving the same success." In her story, Michelle listed the names of famous Hispanics from history who accomplished greatness. Then she added her own name, writing, "Who knows, perhaps Michelle Jimenez will one day be remembered as well." I asked her to elaborate, how would she like to be remembered? The following was her response:

> Most people want to be remembered for their own accomplishments or how far they went in life. I don't think that's how I want to be remembered. I'd rather be known by how I helped others go far in their life. It's not really that I want to be something big in my life, it's more like I want to help others become something big. I want to help other Hispanics. Not like Mother Teresa, not as extreme, but just as a person that helped in the advancement of Hispanics.

Michelle's mother's phrase, after the rain comes the sun, does indeed hold true for her youngest daughter.

The long, often arduous journey to higher education imbued Michelle with a strong conviction in the importance of family, friends, and diligence. In her eyes you see the "old soul" of a woman of the world, someone who embraces challenges as a learning opportunity. In conclusion, Michelle mentioned her definition of success, beyond just the act of being successful, is the individual purpose of one's life.

> If you struggle and you go through all the phases and you come through, you're successful. That's what I value—being able to get through the challenges and low points in life, so that I'm able to enjoy and appreciate the good points.

In my field notes I wrote,

> In coding Michelle's story I am reminded of why she was such a powerful participant. Her words echo the pain of a childhood she recognizes as limited (scary perhaps) but yet she persevered. I wrote things like goal-oriented, confident, and powerful through-out the coding process.

Unsolicited, Michelle wrote her story for this project, not because she wanted someone to hear her story, but because she wanted to be a part of the change. That is the spirit of this young woman, a member of a large university community who rises above the written word.

Lorena

Lorena, the youngest of three children, was born into an unsettled home. Her parents illegally entered the United States with forged papers, fell in love, and began a family. Her father was married prior to meeting Lorena's mother, but never divorced his first wife. So Lorena's parents never officially married. Her father was also an abusive alcoholic who died when Lorena was a freshman in high school. Lorena's story speaks of tremendous odds and incredible resilience.

A Mother's Journey

Lorena's mother struggled to keep her small family together and safe. She was born in Mexico, the youngest of nine children, to a poor family. She was told in sixth

grade that she was no smart enough to continue school, due mainly to the cost of attendance for junior and senior high school in Mexico, and so, at the age of 11, she joined the labor force cleaning clothes and houses. Eventually she found work at a shoe factory at the age of 12. Lorena's insight into her mother's harsh childhood is remarkable. "When I was in seventh grade, you know, writing letters to my girlfriends, you were over there just working. It's unbelievable." At the young age of 14, she moved from her home in a small city to the home of siblings, in a larger city, to do housework. She found employment at another factory, sewing uniforms, and at 20 she traveled with friends from the factory to the United States to make more money. Her friend's brother, who would later become her common-law husband, picked them up at the bus station.

"[My parents] didn't marry because he had another wife." Lorena's father, separated from his first wife, began a second family with Lorena's mother. In the mid-1980s Lorena's mother helped her husband, and then herself, to obtain legal papers to remain in the United States. The fact that she was not married to Lorena's father proved to be an issue when she was forced to answer questions about her relationship with her children's father. From the beginning, Lorena's parents' relationship was strained. Her father was an abusive alcoholic, leaving bruises in his wake and frightening her mother to the extent that she packed up her young children and returned to Mexico.

> This started happening before they had children. She left. They already had my sister and brother. My mother gathered her children. She moved back to Mexico, she told her family everything. My sister and brother now have dual

> citizenship because when she moved over there she was like, they're Mexican citizens, they were going to school here. She was prepared to stay there.

Lorena's father went after his family and promised that things would be different. She returned to the United States, perhaps motivated by the fact that in Mexico she had nothing. "She was like, 'I didn't have anything over there. I wouldn't have anyone helping me out. When it came to money issues it was like who is going to pay for your school and stuff like that?'" Shortly after she returned, Lorena's mother gave birth to her third and final child, Lorena. She also sought support from Al-Anon to "help her cope with my father's disease," a proactive step in her own recovery and an example of Lorena's mother's strength that repeats itself through Lorena's story.

> I guess she just knew if she did not get any help she knew she would not be a good person to be in our life. "I'm just going to go crazy. I just need help in order to keep this family running, to keep this family going." That's what she would say.

Living Life

Lorena's mother stayed at home with her children until Lorena turned 4, securing employment at a department store warehouse. Her father was a welder. Although Lorena was never abused by her father—he stopped drinking before she turned 6 years old—she does recall the aftereffects of his hard lifestyle. "I didn't really experience the abuse, because by the time I was 6 he had stopped drinking because his liver had exploded and was told he could not drink anymore so he didn't." His "liver explosion" was a coughing fit that resulted first in the appearance

of blood, an emergency trip to the hospital, and a diagnosis of severe sclerosis. He never sought further help.

Going to School

Beginning formal schooling carried the added pressure of speaking a different language for Lorena. At home she spoke Spanish with her parents, occasionally English with her siblings. Her difficulty with the English language, she said, was due in part to literacy. She spoke English well, but rarely, before school, did an opportunity arise that she wrote in English.

> I think in third grade is when we started taking standardized tests. So, when it came to reading, I had an academic recognition which was like above, I am thinking that is how they separated. That's above average. I guess who ever got that moved on to not just being in ESL classes anymore.

In 4 years, Lorena went from speaking only Spanish, to sufficient proficiency in English, such that she was moved from ESL class to a mainstream fourth-grade classroom.

Lorena credits her older sister with her work ethic. "She was always reading, she was just always smart. She got into all these schools and I was just like, 'My sister is really smart,' you know? I want to be like her." However, her mother also played a role in defining the importance of education. When she turned 16, Lorena's sister discovered she was pregnant. She decided to keep the child and marry her boyfriend. Lorena's mother agreed to the marriage on the grounds that Lorena's sister complete high school. Lorena was 9 years old when her nephew was born, and her sister was a junior in high school. Her sister moved home during her senior year when

her husband joined the army to finish high school. Lorena's mother quit her job to care for the baby. Lorena's sister graduated fifth in her class.

Getting Out

Loren's years of elementary school were, by her definition, average. She earned As and Bs, struggling a bit at first until she discovered her "system" for understanding. Like her sister before her, the decision to attend a magnet program and get out of the neighborhood school was of primary importance. She applied to nearly a dozen magnet programs but was not accepted to any of the programs. Begrudgingly she entered the local middle school, terrified that she would be beaten up by the tougher neighborhood girls. "I would say yes, it was a tough neighborhood, but like, I wasn't around it. I was at home." She got out of middle school, luckily, without fighting.

I Had Favorite Teachers, Therefore I Thought I Had Favorite Subjects

Seventh grade was a turning point in Lorena's academic career. Her grades hovered in the A to B range, "average" by Lorena's standards, but prior to that year she was not placed in advanced classes. She believed that good teachers had to be active teachers, engaging the students in a respectful manner and in turn earning their respect.

> They didn't have to keep telling you to be quiet, sit down in your seat, they would say it once and you would do it. You keep listening in class, you don't jump around. I guess the best teachers were the ones that related more to us. They were easy going but they were still enforcing.

Her math teacher, a man she remembered as strict, administered a placement test to determine who would enter algebra or prealgebra at the start of eighth grade. Lorena placed well on the exam and was placed in algebra for the following fall. But at the completion of the class, at the end of eighth grade, Lorena was not permitted to sit for the exit exam. "My teacher pulled me and a couple of students aside to tell us we would not be taking the exit exam because she didn't think we would pass. That really hurt me because I knew I could." Lorena was determined to begin calculus in high school, which required a passing grade for algebra. She attended summer school, retaking the algebra class. She scored a 95 on the exit exam. "From that moment forward I decided I would not let others make the decision if I was capable of achieving my goals because if I believed it, I could do it."

Learning to Self-Advocate

At the completion of eighth grade, Lorena began applying to magnet programs outside of the neighborhood. Her goal, she wrote, was to receive admission to either a health professions or performing art high school program. She was not accepted to either of her top choices but did receive admission to a criminal justice magnet high school, the one from which her sister graduated. She reluctantly began her high school career at the high school, but shortly after the school year began, she knew she wanted to leave.

> I called my mom, I don't like it, I don't think I'm going to benefit here as much as I'm going to benefit over there. Because I don't see myself in that environment, criminal justice? I had to talk to the principal in order to get out

> of the school. So I was like, "You gotta let me go, I'm ready." I did make a case and they were like, "Why don't you wait here for 2 more weeks?" and I was like, "Yes, but if I stay here 2 more weeks I'll be missing 2 weeks from over there."

She was allowed to transfer. Loren's determination grew. She told her advisor which classes she would take and which she would not take. She faced the bullies of her childhood, despite her fear, with intelligence and attitude. Her cunning proved successful, and they left her alone. Lorena learned to be confident. "Being scared, that's where I got my confidence, you don't want to be beat up so don't be, don't be picked on."

Going Down the Path That Would Lead to College

At the beginning of Lorena's 1st year of high school her father succumbed to a lifelong battle with alcoholism. The last 2 years of his life were difficult on the family. Lorena commented on the relief she felt following her father death:

> Yes, I think about that time, and for while I was like wow. I felt sad because I felt [relieved]. But late on, I was like, that wasn't my father anymore, he was a completely different person. So that's when I pulled away.

At his funeral Lorena was able to meet, for the first time, her half-siblings and her father's wife. Prior to her father's death, Lorena was unaware of this "other" family. The start of high school, the introduction of a new family history, and a developing focus on college resulted in a positive transition for Lorena, despite the void left by her father's passing.

Stepping Stones

Lorena's story began, "I have been trying to remember the first time I heard the word *college* and I can't. College wasn't something I stumbled across I knew about for years I would attend." However, the start of high school meant the introduction of college as a possibility for her future. After moving to the neighborhood high school, reuniting with her best friend, Lorena began to blossom. She joined cheerleading, her peers elected her as class president twice, and she involved herself in the life of the school. That, she suggested, is how she gained popularity. This was also the time that her confidence began to soar. "I felt good about everything. …I felt like I knew who I was and what I was there for, what my goals were. To go to college. To go to college and be a doctor."

In Lorena's case, it might be argued that the identification of this goal, to be a doctor, was the turning point in her academic journey. She accompanied her sister to various doctors' visits and later attended the birth of her niece. She was inducted into the National Honor's Society, an honor bestowed to students with promising grades and social involvement. Participating in National Honor Society bolstered Lorena's academic goals, providing her role models in the older students who were all college bound. In describing this accomplishment, Lorena expanded on her new sense of promise: "This is a big thing and I was just really happy because I felt like I was going towards, I was being one of those people who was going to college that was going to do something."

A second opportunity, a "stepping stone" in Lorena's words, came with an offer to attend Cornell University the summer before her senior year in high school. The program offered high school students a 6-week glimpse into the world of college. Although the experience was worthwhile, Lorena discovered that she would prefer to stay closer to home, to her mom. However, she did learn that she was prepared to attend college. Her classes, though occasionally boring, were manageable. She learned "that I liked college but not one that was going to be so far away." Perhaps the biggest lesson taken from her summer at Cornell was that she could do it. To go from not having college on her radar at all to be being one of eight people selected by her high school to attend Cornell, Lorena had proven herself a formidable academic adversary. She was going to college.

Choosing to attend the University came at the suggestion of a "crazy smart, normal, Algebra II teacher." Despite the fact that her mother wanted her to stay closer to home, Lorena applied in the fall of her senior year to the University and was admitted. Lorena's mother was concerned about the cost of college, the distance, and letting go of her youngest child. However, in likening her own journey to the United States to that of her daughter's journey to college, Lorena's mother said,

> I understand, I understand. I know that you feel stronger being over there. I guess I felt, cause I felt the same way when I left, that's why I didn't go back because there was nothing to back to. What was there to go back to? Washing dishes? Laundry? No, I didn't want to do that, that's why I didn't go back. So I understand.

The journey away from home, the pathway to college that was marred with various pitfalls, resulted in mother and daughter drawing closer.

Man Plans and God Laughs

That spring Lorena's hard work was once again rewarded with the honor of valedictorian, an unexpected surprise.

> I guess because [valedictorian] wasn't something that I expected and um...I wasn't, I wasn't class president that year because of all the social things that had happened. Just everything like that year just me ready to get out. I was like let's just get out. I was ready to get out of here, and being valedictorian, that's a big accomplishment. And I was like wow, my sister graduated fifth in her class, I graduated number one. I was like, that's big!

She delivered her speech with pride, choosing a topic that was a bit political, a bit against the grain, and wholly confident. She successfully moved her life 3 hours away from home to attend the University. She enjoyed a successful 1st year, met a wonderful roommate with whom she shared cultural and academic interests, and overcame the disappointment of not receiving admission to the competitive major she wanted. "You plan, then God laughs. So you can plan and things might not turn out that way. But I feel like I didn't make it into nursing for a reason. You know? I'm supposed to detour."

Lorena's depth of character, her integrity and her confidence, her desire to play a role in effectively changing her future, in the aggregate, are the strength of this you woman. She is honest, straightforward, and knowledgeable about topics that range from alcoholism to teen pregnancy, politics to literature. She is and will be active in changing the world view; of this I have no doubt. We concluded our discussion with her sharing the following example of the injustices she has faced during her short life. I believe it depicts the lessons she learned along her journey to higher education and, in particular, offers insight into the woman she has become.

> [My roommate] is Salvadorian. She's like, "I don't have health insurance," and I was like I don't have health insurance either. So she's like, "So I go to these clinics and I swear they ask like 10 times, are you pregnant? Do you think you might be pregnant?" And she's like, "I feel like they are just interrogating me." And I'm like, "I know what you mean and I hate it. I hate going. They don't know me. I'm valedictorian of my class and you're asking me if I'm pregnant?" I would like to run that different, so much different.

The world is full of injustice. But one can rest assured that Lorena, having walked the stairwell herself, will change the world.

Bertha

Define a Typical Childhood

Bertha's parents began their marriage in their native Mexico in a small, poor farming village. They met at a local dance and married, trying to establish a life in their home town.

> As kids, both my parents worked from dawn till dusk. This included dropping out of school at the age of 12 in order to ensure their family's survival they never gave in to their struggle to get ahead in life.

Initially, Bertha's paternal grandmother supported the young couple, while Bertha's father searched for a job. Work was difficult to find, and Bertha's father was anxious to begin a new life. Together, the young couple carried their two young sons and began the long journey through the desert. "Literally, my parents walked across the desert." The journey was long and Bertha's mother happily allowed a woman in the group to carry her youngest son, who was 6 months old, while she continued to carry her older son, who was 1 1/2 years old. At one point, in the glare of the sun, Bertha's mother temporarily lost sight of the woman carrying her baby. Then, in the settling

dust of the desert she saw the woman walking ahead in the distance. However, that fear left her, perhaps, with the fierce sense of protection she felt for her children later in Bertha's life. Eventually the young family walked across the boarder as illegal citizens in a new world.

The family eventually would settle in Texas after jumping around from family to friends, state to state, job to job. The choice to move to Texas was motivated by the recent move of a paternal aunt, who helped Bertha's parents with residency as well as procuring work and childcare for their growing brood.

> They lived a little bit close to where my aunt lives because my aunt was helping my dad you know find work and helping my mom in every way possible. If it weren't for my aunt, we would be struggling even more.

The young family did struggle, financially and socially, to make a better life and ensure a more promising future for their children. "My parents tried to provide for us and give us our needs of course before our wants. Growing up I had a somewhat typical childhood. Of course, living in a household where my parents struggled."

Struggling to Make a Life

Bertha's maturity and her acceptance of the life her parents were able to provide are remarkable. In her story she reflected on her childhood. "Now I reflect back at my teenage years and realize I committed so much wrong. At age 13 I would complain because I wanted the $50 dollar shoes every kid had in school." Bertha watched her parents work two jobs each to make ends meet, to provide for their children, and eventually, to buy their first home.

> My mom never bought us like Barbies and stuff like that. I played with my brothers if I didn't have toys. I don't know. I would just sit by myself. TV wasn't a big deal in my house so we really didn't watch much. Nowadays I hear people, "Oh, remember this cartoon?" and I wouldn't know what they were talking about.

Bertha's childhood required she mature quickly and that she develop creative skills and innovative practices. Her parents did not have sufficient funds to provide new toys and games to entertain their children. Bertha entertained herself by playing football with her brothers and the neighborhood boys, often the only girl. She spent countless hours laughing and talking with her sister in their bedroom. Bertha learned young to be thankful what that which she had, rather than to cry over what she did not have.

In recalling her childhood, Bertha remembered a significant event in the life of her family. She was outdoors, playing with a neighbor, when her eldest brother and his girlfriend pulled up in front of the house. Her brother was shot by a gang who mistook his truck for that of an enemy. He was rushed to the emergency room and young Bertha was ushered indoors. No one spoke of the incident. Her brother survived the injuries he sustained form the bullets. Bertha continues to admire him for his perseverance during his recovery.

On Being a Brat

> I kid you not, I was a brat. I was bad. I was really bad. Like I remember we were at a boot store and like my sister, my parents were buying my sister books and like I wanted some so bad just because she was getting some and they of course weren't going to buy them for me. I threw a fit. Now it's like, "God, how could I do that?" I feel bad for my parents.

Bertha's childhood memories are filled with the burdens of a child who lacked resources. She remembers wanting the bell-bottom pants that all the kids were wearing, to have the right shoes, to fit in. Her mother shared stories of her own childhood with Bertha. When her mother was young, she did not even own shoes. The message stuck. Watching her parents struggle, a theme throughout her narrative, she wrote of a family life that required a great deal of autonomy and resilience. She learned to appreciate what she did have, to find satisfaction in her family, and to find peace with the journey.

During her formative years, Bertha's parents were both working two jobs, preventing them from participating completely in the lives of their children. "What I learned from school. I guess seeing other of my friends and their relationships with their families and what not." Bertha watched her parents work, she went to school, but what she remembered most from her childhood was her sense of awareness. They worked hard in order to provide for their children. Bertha finally understood why she could not have the boots she wanted at Wal-Mart, why her parents were gone most evenings as well as during the day, and why they were unable to attend her extracurricular activities. They worked because they need the money.

> Growing up I really didn't have other friends. I had free time on my hands. I would look at my parents and see what their life was like. They would sit in the kitchen and talk about things, and I would listen.

Bertha's parents cleaned offices during the evening hours after completing their day jobs. Her mother was a cook at a coffee shop at the airport, a position that did not require her to speak English. Her father worked in heating and air-conditioning repair.

With limited education and English skills, neither of her parents was able to find more lucrative positions.

My Parents Never Said, "Okay, Go Inside and Read This Book"

Education was not a topic often discussed in Bertha's home. Neither of her parents received formal education beyond the seventh grade. In coming to America, Bertha's father hoped to provide a better life for his family.

> The drive of my parents has shown me the value of an education in life. My parents have made it this far lacking any formal training. However, they have dedicated their lives to ensure that I have an education much better than the one they were deprived.

At home Bertha's family communicated in English, a stumbling block when she entered the formal schooling system. She learned her second language, English, beginning her first day of prekindergarten. She was enrolled in ESL classes until the third grade, when she was placed in regular classes. Bertha's siblings walked similar paths in their early education. Her brothers helped their young sister with her language skills, but for her older sister, who has developmental delays, learning a second language proved to be a big hurdle in school. Bertha's sister remains a child emotionally and socially, despite her age, and lives at home with her parents.

The other children, however, were encouraged to work hard and to graduate from high school. Bertha's father encouraged his eldest son to attend community college and, later, his third-born son, to attend a 4-year institution to study art. College was entirely new to Bertha's parents.

> My parents, I guess they didn't really know how hard it was going to be for him [the brother who went to art school]. Whether it would be financially or something. I mean, for them, having my brothers graduate high school was like a big thing.

All of Bertha's siblings, as a result of her parents support and insistence, graduated from high school. Despite the fact that their parents' English skills were inadequate and that neither of them was literate, the children fared well in the school system. Although her parents never said to her it was time to do homework or focus on her academics, they did instill in their daughter several lessons she continues to carry to this day.

Entering middle school Bertha discovered athletics. "I wanted to get into sports and like my parents couldn't like, you know, you had to pay for uniforms and stuff like that. And my parents couldn't pay for it." Wanting to participate on team sports with her classmates, Bertha chose to find a job to supplement her athletic endeavors. Her choice reflects her growing maturity and awareness of her family's struggle to survive, financially, in the face of great adversity.

The profound impact of her realization of her family's struggle as well as of the dedication of her parents to their family caused Bertha to mature quickly. At the age of 15 she found a job working in a dress shop. She was paid "under the table," given her young age, and at the end of her work week she would turn her check over to her parents. She wrote, "In witnessing their never-ending dedication to provide for my family, I was empowered to translate this same will to succeed into an education opportunity for me." Bertha learned responsibility and graciousness working at the dress shop. Shortly after finding her job, Bertha's parents both lost their jobs. Her

mother was injured and her father was laid off. The money Bertha earned was quickly diverted, without protest, to help cover household costs. Bertha's brother, each of whom had moved out of the parent's home, also returned to help financially during this time.

> And that's why honestly I really admire my brothers so much, just because they've been there. They are not the kind of kids who just were like, "Oh, we're struggling" and then did their own thing, spent their money or hanging out with their friends or stuff like that. They tried to help out, do whatever they could.

Bertha's family is her bedrock. She continued to work and turn over her paycheck to her parents until she turned 16.

As a 16-year-old woman Bertha remained ever aware of her parent's struggles. She tried to balance work, school, and athletics but eventually was forced to focus on her growth as a student. She quit her job at the dress shop and focused on her athletics and academics. However, she was constantly reminded of the differences in her life from those of her peers.

> I had friends whose parents would come out and support them, but like I would tell my parents to go, but of course they were working so they couldn't make it to my games. They were just really tired. At times, sometimes, I wouldn't even tell them that I had a game. And it would make me sad. I remember crying a few times in the locker room because we would win like a really important game, and you would see all of these parents in the stadium you know, cheering their kids on. And my parents weren't there.

Although not physically present, Bertha's parents were emotionally involved in their children's lives. She recalled debriefing with her mom at night, before bed, discussing each of their days. Again, reflecting her maturity, Bertha defines their support as the roof over her head and the financial assistance they provided. "I knew it was there."

Reflecting on her academic journey, Bertha spoke of a sense of responsibility to her parents and to her family. Knowing that they were limited by their lack of formal education in terms of mobility, Bertha wanted to attend college in the hopes of one day returning home to take care of her parents. "I want to provide for them one day. I don't want them to have to work and worry about you know always, 'How are we going to pay the car note?' and things like that. They deserve a break." Bertha, determined to provide a better life through education, modeled her choices after her older brother, who attended a 4-year institution to study art. She focused on not simply graduating from high school, but on which college she would attend. "College, for me, there was no other option, you know, this is what I'm going to do. And also, I'm aware that nowadays you know if you to college you have a better chance of being successful in life."

Defining Success

> Like eagles, [my parents] have soared and have managed to give my family a better life. I am grateful for everything that I have accomplished, learned, and experienced. My family has gone through a bumpy road, yet strength is present in [our] household, and now it is my turn to pay a smooth part of this road I call life.

Bertha's parents proved to be a centrifugal force in her life, teaching her not to focus on her own wants and needs but instead to see the good of the whole, to recognize the value of hard work and persistence, and to appreciate the finer things in life. Watching her parents she learned perseverance in spite of great odds, determination to succeed, and a definition of success that was shaped by her parents.

> I admire them so much because of the fact that despite that they didn't have any formal training of school or anything, they managed. They somehow, scraping, you know, coins here and there, doing whatever they could to just…I mean, to be able to support a family and have a house and have a vehicle? To be able to do all that, you know, despite the odds? I have to go to school. What else am I going to do?

The recurrent theme in Bertha's early years was developing awareness. She knew, watching her parents, that working hard was valuable, and she did not shy away. She focused on her academics in high school, knowing her grades would play a large role in the financial support she would receive to attend college. She spent every day of her junior and senior years in high school applying for scholarships to attend college. Her persistence resulted in enough money to attend college. And her grades ensured admission to the college of her choice.

What Is Failure?

"I want to emphasize one point; I do not know how to fail. Of course failure will come and go, but I have been taught to get right back up and keep on going!" To say that Bertha works hard, to say that she is focused or mature, to say that she is confident and gifted is to miss the most essential element of her character. She radiates peacefulness. Her approach to life, as she would say, is not that of a typical 19-year old. She looks to God and her family to find peace, to learn a lesson from every experience and encounter, and to keep her eyes on the horizon line: graduation. "My interpretation of college is that I have no other destination but to succeed." Failure, in Bertha's mind, would amount to forgetting where she came from and where she is headed, losing sight of how hard her family worked to be sure she could

attend college, and perhaps the avoidance of experience or the refusal to learn. "There have been so many attempts to express to others the magnitude of such experiences that make me who I am, but I can only translate my uniqueness into successes."

Now That I'm Here…

Bertha began her 1st year of college with great expectations and high standards for her own behavior. She took good advantage of the University and opportunities that arose, studying abroad in Mexico during her first summer in college, finding a major that allowed her to combine her interest in nutrition and social justice, and giving her mother some of her financial aid to put a sizable down payment on a car. Bertha's mother never owned her own car. I asked her about her dedication and sense of duty; she replied:

> Everything just boils, it goes back to my parents. 'Cause they instilled it in us. Just whatever you do, give it all you can, you know? I mean, why not? In order for you to get anything out of life you have to put in a certain amount of dedication. In order to get something back from it.

Again, dedication and determination, lessons that Bertha learned early on in her life, forced her to get out of bed and "make everyday a better day."

Bertha's choice of a competitive major coupled with her refusal to walk away from a learning opportunity will result in her retaking a class this spring. Although she earned a B in the course, she did not believe she learned all there was to learn in the course. She approached the professor and said that she would retake the class, with him, in the spring. She wants to learn more. She did not, as may be the customary behavior of her peers, complain about the B she received. "I really didn't

see any point in complaining. I never saw my parents complain, so why would I complain?" The bumpy road that Bertha traveled to arrive at higher education was full of pitfalls and dangerous curves. However, with the support of her family and an early awareness of the magnitude of their struggles, she learned a heightened sensitivity, dedication, determination, and above all a sense of responsibility that together create peacefulness in her speech and in her presence.

I walked away from our lunch with a sense of purpose, a belief that despite the hurdles in life, one must always see the big picture. In my field notes, before we met, I wrote the following about Bertha's story,

> I just read Bertha's story for the first time. And all I can think is that the bones to her story are stronger than any of the previous 6. She gets it. She knows what I'm doing. She recognizes the sacrifice of her parents and she uses that as fuel for her own success. At such a young age. I look forward to talking to her one-on-one. There is no breadth due to the two pages but there is great depth…but you can hear or maybe you can see the persistent and perhaps spunky girl poking her head around the prose.

I did meet that spunky girl, both in her words and in her presence, a sage soul whose journey speaks volumes about character and strength.

Amore

Amore has the most incredible smile and sensitive air about her. I met her before a meeting of the Program A, and within minutes of describing my project to her she smiled and said that she would be happy to help. Within days of our first meeting, I received the first segment of what would turn out to be five segments of her complete, 16-page story. Beginning in her "kinder" year, she walked me through

her early memories as a child, and in a profound gesture, referred to this segment of her story as "Behind These Brown Eyes." What followed was a story of early abuse, at the hands of domineering influences in her early life, and in the end, her growth as a resilient young woman. Throughout the entire story Amore's voice is clear and consistent, reminding the reader that here is a young woman to be heard.

Behind These Brown Eyes

Amore does indeed have large, brown eyes. They are, some have told her, the windows to her soul. She cannot mask her true feelings, as her emotions are reflected in those eyes. Her eyes are the ribbon of meaning that threads its way through her early years and into her precollege days of setting her goals for a prosperous future. Amore is approximately a year older than her younger sister, Blanca, who inherited their father's green eyes. Amore's father and his family refer to Blanca, who shares a strong resemblance to that side of the family, with her pale skin and bright green eyes, as "Los Ojos Verde," Green Eyes. Amore's own eyes turn downward when she speaks of her father's adoration for her younger sister, an adoration that does not spread to his older daughter. "I think this, I was doomed from birth to always be trying. I was just doomed to always try to please him." Nothing, in Amore's estimation, would please him. His older daughter does not look like him, does not act like him, and was not the son he wanted. Amore was different.

> I never, in my mind as a kid, I never knew we were poor. You don't think about that when you are a kid. I guess we struggled and that's where a lot of parents' arguments were about. And, well, my dad's ways.

Growing up, Amore's father and mother worked a great deal. Her father, in particular, was absent a great deal. Amore's early years set the tone for her ardent pursuit of her father's affection. She recalled an example of her father's frustrations with her on a day she stayed home from kindergarten due to a cold. Amore's mother, who worked two jobs and attended college full time, was unable to stay home with her sick child. In her place, Amore's father took a day off, a difficult task for a workaholic, to care of his older daughter. Amore was aware, at a young age, of her parents' sacrifices. Feeling better that morning, she thought about her mother and decided that she may lend a hand in the household chores. Amore grabbed a spray bottle to wash the bathroom mirrors and, without newspaper or paper towel nearby, she used a bath towel to wipe clear the glass. Her father entered the room and caught his 5-year-old daughter cleaning the mirrors. Amore described his reaction in the following excerpt:

> When he came in I didn't know if I had done right or if I did wrong. He picked me up, I can remember, he had his hand [she gestures that he grabbed the back of her neck and forearm] and he hit my face into the mirror. And that's when I got the black eye. He hit me. And then he put me down and he was like, "Do you see what you did?" I ran to my room and I just stayed there crying.

Shortly after she arrived in her room, Amore's father entered, carrying a frozen bag of vegetables. He lifted her head and placed the frozen bag over her eye to prevent further swelling.

Amore's mother returned later that afternoon to see her child's black eye. Amore told her she had fallen. When Amore returned to school the next day, her black eye evident, Child Protective Services was summoned. She never told on her father, despite the insistent questions of the adults in her life. "I just denied it, denied,

denied. I didn't want anything to happen to him. I should have wanted something to happen to him. But I guess, no, I didn't want anything to happen because he was my dad." Despite the incident in the bathroom, Amore wrote that she still loved her father, desperately, but that moment of physical violence set the tone for the rest of her life. She "dove" into school, knowing that an education would be her way out. Amore internalized, at a young age, her father's disdain for his oldest daughter. She learned to fear him, to shrink from his touch, and to feel that no matter how hard she worked or how much she achieved, it would never be enough. "Still, to this day, I am afraid of him."

Amore's early memories of her father caused her eyes to cloud over and her chin to dip. She stared at her shoes, her voice cracking at times, though not once did she shed a tear. She remembered her fear, a feeling that remains to this day, of her father. He was a hard-working man who, from the onset of his relationship with Amore's mother when they were in high school, cheated on the women in his life. His job required that he traveled a great deal; time spent away from the family was time he spent with girlfriends. When he returned home from work, his family sprang into action.

> I remember we'd be sitting in the living room. Mom would be studying in the kitchen or just taking a break. Just take a break. We'd hear the Blazer, that rumble, coming down the street. Oh gosh. The minute we could hear that, we all got up on our toes. Blanca and I ran to our beds. My mom picked up our stuff and started the oven, getting everything ready for my dad. I remember not being able to sleep because I was always trying to hear to make she would be okay.

School Days

Amore's memories of her early grade school years are full of the taunts of older children. These years, in her words, were her "ugly duckling years," marked by missing teeth, a bad hair cut, and a slight lisp. Despite these "impediments," Amore set herself apart from her other classmates as a budding intellect. Unfortunately, young children are not particularly forgiving of smart kids. The bullying was, at times, unbearable. Young Amore turned to her teachers for support and understanding. At home, things were about to improve. Amore's mother graduated from college and announced that she was divorcing Amore's father.

> Once my mom got her degree, that was her freedom. That's why it is so important to get at least one degree, that's what she always said, that's what's going to free you in life. That's what's going to be your ticket. You can't get that revoked.

The young girl "held her composure" at school, but again her eyes told the story of her heart. Her teachers reached out to her and supported the young girl while she struggled to understand her quickly changing world. To this day, some 13–14 years later, Amore remembers the names of each of these supportive women, acknowledgement of their powerful and supportive influence.

The bullying continued throughout second and third grade. Amore's fellow students mocked her missing teeth, her intelligence, and anything else they found interesting. On occasion these bullies physically assaulted her, though their words hurt most. When Amore reached out, once again, to her teacher for help, the teacher laughed at the antics of schoolchildren. Amore was crushed and at that moment

vowed that she would become "the best student ever in the history in the history of their lives and throughout my life," a promise that would extend to her father as well.

In fourth grade Amore once again found a role model in her teacher. Ms. Grant provided Amore an example of independence, a lesson the young girl took with her over the remained of her years in elementary school. Ms. Grant owned her own home and car, she was physically attractive, intelligent, and she was unmarried. She was an independent woman. The bullying that Amore experienced in her early years began to disappear, and her teeth grew in. Fifth and sixth grade passed without much exception. Amore learned to deal with the taunts of her classmates. She grew stronger and more independent. At the conclusion of her elementary years, Amore's mother married a man named Robert, a relationship that proved to be a blessing, in Amore's opinion, from the start.

Seventh grade ushered in a promising new start for Amore. Amore's new stepfather was a wonderful and supportive man. She turned to him as a father figure; he seemed to understand her from the start. Amore's mother was happy and, shortly after marrying Robert, gave birth to Amore's younger brother. During her junior high years Amore experienced her first crush, a short-lived romance that resulted in a close friendship that remains strong to this day. Eighth grade found Amore developing her natural athleticism. She participated in track and field, basketball, volleyball, and softball. Amore recalled watching the news on September 11, 2001, in horror. After that day her family grew closer, aware perhaps of the precious value of family and the fragility of our existence.

Amore's life and her ambitions were taking shape. She was crowned Valentine Queen by her peers, a stark difference from her early years as the self-proclaimed "ugly duckling." Finally, eighth grade offered a fleeting glimpse into the inner heart of Amore, a heart that wants to act. She starred, with her girlfriends, in a dance and lip sync to a popular Broadway musical number. Although her family remained unaware of the "other persona" that Amore kept locked inside, that moment on stage freed her inner actress, though it was not until much later in her life that she admitted her desire, to her family's surprise, to be an actress.

New Beginnings

High school presented a series of fortunate and, at times, unfortunate events. Her mother and Robert decided to move out of state. "My mom, a woman who has gained everything in her life by back-breaking work and a fight to obtain her degree, decided to move a state away from all that we, as a family, had ever known." Amore was forced to choose between living with her mother or staying permanently with her father. She chose to relocate with her mother, moving several states away from her father. Her father was unhappy with her decision and tried to dissuade her from moving.

> The way he said it I will never forget. He was at my tournament and he sat me down and said, "Why are you going to [State]?" I was like, "I'm going to live with mom." I was thinking there is no way in hell I'm going to live with you. And he said, "You're just going to be tumbleweed in the wind." It has always been that constant battle with him. I always have to prove myself with him.

Her father's comments left Amore frustrated and feeling utterly worthless in the eyes of her father, a man that seemed to be blind her many accomplishments. Although she hated her father, at some level, for "his ways" as a womanizer, Amore sought his approval.

Early in high school Amore talked to her mother about her parents' marriage, asking her mother why she stayed with her emotionally and verbally abusive husband. Her mother responded that she remained until she was able to take care of her children; she stayed until she graduated from college. Amore recalled the importance of that conversation as a turning point in her academic careers. She knew that no matter the difficulty, she would attend college, embrace her independence, and never find herself in her mother's position. Amore planned her future and she worked diligently at her schoolwork. She knew that no matter what was required of her, she did not want to find herself in her mother's position, relying on a man who made her life miserable.

High school passed in something of a blur. Amore filled her days with softball. She was the team's pitcher, perhaps a sign of things to come in her career choice as an actor, she suggested. "I always wanted to be a performer. I guess that is why I was a pitcher. Everyone watches the pitcher!" However, her coach made loving softball difficult, even for the most devoted players. At the start of Amore's junior year in high school, the ease of high school came to an abrupt stop. "All I can say about this year can be made in the form of a sound, make the sound of tiredness, disgust, and add that of an extremely intolerable bellyache, it sounds like, 'Ugg,

umph, ahh!'" Amore recalled practices for softball that included 2-mile runs in her cleats, bruised and burned elbows, and scabs on her knees that threatened to tear open at any moment.

Because of her talent, Amore was promoted, over a senior, to the varsity team. She was not welcome, by her teammates, and it seems by her coach, who enjoyed the muck raking. Once again Amore was in a position to prove herself worthy, a position too familiar to a young woman constantly proving herself worthy to her father. Yet, older and wiser, Amore did not allow the taunts of her teammates or the negativity of her coach to slow her progress. Of her coach she wrote,

> I hate him for treating me like a slave and for making me feel as if I would never succeed, yet I thank him for pushing me to drive past him and prove that he would always be wrong in judging my character and my ability to do the things that he said I could never do. In a way he mirrored my father in his actions, words and mannerisms, and he would be another who I can actually say I shocked the hell out of.

Shock them she did. Amore returned to softball her senior year, stronger and ready for the fight. She was elected captain by her teammates. She served on the prom-planning committee, and in June delivered the valedictorian speech in front of her graduating class in a professional football arena. She wrote, "Yes, all of the hard work, ridicule, and timeless events that occurred in my student life paid off in the end."

Learning to Be…

In my field notes I commented on meeting Amore,

> In listening to her during our interview it because clear that her eyes embody all that is "tainted" about her—they are different than her fathers, she was not a boy, they tell the story of her emotions, they give her away. The first time we sat down to chat I commented on how nice her computer was and this college freshman turned to me and said, I know, I feel so selfish having such a nice computer every time I turn it on. She did not wait for me to acknowledge her selflessness. She immediately turned and looked at the machine, confirming what I had come to suspect already. Amore is an incredible young woman—she possesses a depth and a breadth to her character that you rarely see in adults. She is empathic and intuitive, yet a wounded bird hovers just under the surface. She spent her life trying to prove to her father that she was worthy of his attention and his acceptance…and yet she is still trying to prove that. Some day, she told me, I will tell him how I really feel. I heard her tell her story and I could feel the hair on the back of my neck raise in indignation at the treatment she received at the hand of her father. I would love to walk into his world of inadequacies and tell him the only thing he has done right in this world is give life to such a gifted young woman.

Over her lifetime Amore survived many challenges, both emotional and tangible. She struggled to fit in at school, to do well on her academics endeavors, and to flourish despite the often negative feedback from her father. After attending the all-night festivities of Project Graduation, an event designed to keep new graduates away from parties the eve of graduation, Amore spent her day with a friend's family. Enraged by what he called a lack of respect to his family, who were in town for the graduation, he telephoned Amore to vent his frustration.

> My dad gave this whole speech and when he got mad at me that night he told me that everything I'd ever done, all my valedictorian, all my athletic stuff, all my scholarships, doesn't matter to him. It is nothing. That I was nothing. That was the first time he had told me I was nothing.

This discussion followed his oldest daughter's graduation from high school where she accepted numerous awards and accolades and delivered a flawless speech as the class valedictorian.

Amore's life followed a rocky terrain from her early memories of kindergarten through her years in high school. Despite her father's lack of encouragement, Amore did receive support from teachers, peers, and above all, her mother. To meet her is to be proud of her. Even her father, despite his mean temper and verbal lashings, is proud of his daughter. Yet, it appears he is unable to say it.

> Whenever I do talk to his girlfriends, they're like, "Oh, you're Amore? Your dad is so proud of you." And I am like, "How does he say this to you?" They say, "What do you mean? He's always talking about how you are going to university and you're this and you're that." I don't understand. He's never told me he's proud.

Amore's father is, perhaps, frustrated with his independent daughter. In his likeness she competes successfully in sports, she is popular among her peers, and she is prom queen to his prom king so many years before. Yet, he cannot understand her. Maybe he is threatened by her success. So he uses his hands and his words to establish dominance. When he raises his hand, his daughter flinches instinctively. He cried at her graduation party, Amore told me, maybe because he finally realized that he missed her entire life. Maybe, I say, because he regrets that he cannot tell her how he feels.

Turning my Brown Eyes Upon the Stars

The completion of Amore's high school years, her accumulation of athletic and academic honors, including valedictorian and prom queen, found this young woman poised for the next step, her journey to college. She applied to one school, not too close and not too far from home. She starred in her first student film. For the first

time in her life she did not receive straight As, and she survived. She focused and made friends. She strengthened her relationship with her mother's brother, traveling to and from home via his house, catching rides into the city. She grew into a confidant and articulate young woman. In the conclusion to our discussion Amore said,

> With all the bad there's been so much more good. Even though it was bad, it has made me stronger. I always thank God, what He has given me in the past, even though it was bad, think and know how it is now. And so I guess that with everything being the bad and the good, I think that it's all going to be okay.

She finished our conversation talking about her father. She wished that, like her younger sister, she was able to communicate her feelings to him directly. Blanca does not hesitate to tell him how she feels, but something prevents Amore's floodgates from opening. She wrote a letter to her father after a quarrel about Fathers Day. She did not send the letter, but she wished that someday soon she would find the strength to read it to him. I wished her luck. She told me that she hoped, when she did find her voice, that it was not too late. "As for now," she wrote, "I shall place my brown eyes upon the stars that call my name for me to join them in their position, the position of living your wish." Amore is living her wish.

CHAPTER 5

THE BARRIERS AND THE STARS

Introduction

This chapter accomplishes two goals. First, this chapter addresses the students' definition of the barriers they encountered along their journey to higher education. Second, this chapter identifies the individual people, places, things, and events that stand out in the students' stories of overcoming barriers to higher education. One of the primary focuses of this research is that at-risk terminology glosses over the surface, focusing on the situational or contextual limitations of a student's life rather than on the strategies developed and employed by students to overcome limitations. This chapter identifies promise rather than deficit and, in doing so, provides a possible benchmark or moment of recognition for future generations of students who may buy into the dogma. Somewhere, in all of us, stars are waiting to shine.

Income

The first element of class culture is the most obvious and the most objective. Income may be defined as the accrual of financial success, the occupation of an individual, or the value of one's bank account. During coding, income was discussed or alluded to in every discussion and in each of the students' stories. Income took the shape of the four axial codes: (a) financial security and success, (b) working (the

student), (c) occupation (family or parental jobs), and (d) the cost of college. The students spoke of each of these four areas anecdotally, some going into great depth to describe their individual experiences.

Financial Security

The concept of financial security, or more appropriately the lack thereof, was often at the center of each student's story. A general lack of fiduciary stability often left the students struggling to explain their lives, their families, or their path to college. Financial security and the equally important notion of success are the result of a convergence of factors: gainful employment, citizenship, family size, home ownership, access to resources, and health. The mitigating factors are the student's own employment and perhaps the level of parental occupation (e.g., house cleaner or manager). Despite the importance of occupation or student work, financial security and the resulting success are the most important to the students. Their focus on future financial security is often the driving agent behind their application to college, despite the cost.

A sense of security is often challenged by a lack of financial stability in the lives of these students. They understand the power of living in a secure, stable environment as well as providing a security and stable environment in return for their family. Bertha spoke of security in terms of the latter understanding, providing for her parents, in return for the support they provided throughout school and now through college.

> I want to provide for them one day. I don't want them to have to work and worry about you know always how are we going to pay the car not, you know, things like that. I don't want them to have to worry about that, you know. They've worked so hard over the years. They deserve a break, you know? They deserve to be able to just enjoy, "Hey, let's go out to dinner tonight to so and so, to Olive Garden," you know, they normally don't do that. Because you know they're not used to it. You know. Even to this day you know money has been okay but they're still pretty tight on spending. I guess they…my dad, he's saving up this money, he keeps saving up this money.

Bertha was raised with little financial security and perhaps, as a result of job-related injuries and lay-offs causing money to be tight during her childhood, Bertha wished to contribute to her family's economic security.

Family played a key role in a student's perception of financial security, a reoccurring theme throughout each of the student's stories. The lack of discretionary income meant that several of the students' parents were forced to turn to extended family for support. This served as a source of security as well as stress. John Smith's family relied heavily on his father's income as a farm worker. However, the rising costs of farming, coupled with a decreasing need for product, often forced John's father to draw unemployment insurance, occasionally turning to family members for assistance. Early in his life, John recalled a time when his father was on disability due to an accident at work and there was no money to put food on the table. His mother stayed at home with her three small children (three children born in 3 years) and found creative ways to feed her children from what meager food supplies were available.

> I remember my dad saying…well my mom especially; she had three small ones that were young. There was always one coming. There was a time when no money was coming in so my mom would have [to be creative]; there really wasn't anything on the table.

Financial security, in John's case, came from extended family support. His uncles lent his father money during difficult times, and as the children grew, each found work to cover his or her own needs. After Nur's father left, Nur's mother turned to her own parents for financial security and support. Eventually, Nur's mother left her young daughter in the care of her grandparents and sought employment in the city, far from her home. Nur's father refused to furnish any financial support during the separation. A final example of financial hardship was described by Lorena. Lorena's mother suffered physical and emotional abuse at the hands of Lorena's father. After a particularly vicious attack, Lorena's mother decided to return to her home in Mexico. She packed her two young children and left her husband. However, when she arrived in Mexico, she realized that she would be unable to provide for her young family. Said Lorena,

> [My mother] was like, "I didn't have anything over there. I wouldn't have anyone helping me out. I would have family, but when it came to money issues it was like, who is going to pay for your schooling and stuff like that? That would be really difficult for me."

Lorena's mother, despite the abuse, was forced to return to her husband to secure a better future for her children.

Occupation

Parental occupation played a large role in the students' perception of income as a barrier. Whether they were employed as blueberry pickers or teachers, house cleaners or chefs, the parents of these students engaged in work to provide a better life for their families. Some walked across the U.S.–Mexico border, under the cover

of night, to find better paying jobs to ensure their children would have a better life. The choice of occupation was often a result of a lack of education, language barriers, or citizenship. The students' parents left small, agricultural villages in Mexico, Vietnam, or Malaysia to secure any employment, sometimes working several jobs to pay the bills and feed their growing families.

In many of the stories, the parents' occupation was clearly less a choice than a necessity. Lorena described her mother's occupation:

> [Mother] would clean house, she would clean clothes, she finally got a job working at a shoe store in Mexico when she was 12. I was just like, "I was in seventh grade, you know writing letters to my girlfriends and you're over here just working?" It's unbelievable.

Michelle's father accepted an entry-level position with the department of transportation, leaving his postsecondary education unfinished, where he worked his way to a managerial position over the course of his career. His first position with the department of transportation was to collect animal carcasses off the highways. Bertha's parents worked several day jobs and then relied on family to watch the children while they worked nights cleaning office buildings. Later in her life, Bertha's older brothers accepted minimum-wage positions to add their income to the family's dwindling resources.

Despite their own lack of education, the parents of these students worked hard to provide a roof over their children's heads and a better start in a new country. During their own childhood, a number of the students' parents were put to work for the family, their own educational futures forgotten, as seen in the following example from John's story:

> And my grandpa had fields, they used to plant fields and stuff like that, um, my grandpa just told my dad, "you are old enough to go work in the fields, start working in the fields." He was like 8 or 9.

They worked long hours in the fields or in service to their families, cooking and cleaning, sewing in factories, or working under the sun doing construction or in the gardens of wealthy homes. The ultimate goal of these parents was to provide for their families a life they did not have as children. They spoke to their children about working hard in school to be sure they had more options, better options, and jobs that allowed them to stay away from the back-breaking labor of the uneducated and the desperate.

Working

Working during their high school years grew out of a sense of responsibility both to the students' families as well as to themselves. They all spoke of the cost of clothing, school-related activities, and additional needs they had as children. For some, working meant relieving their parents of responsibility; for others, working meant social emancipation. All of the student participants worked at one point during their high school years to supplement the family income. Bertha rationalized the decision to work, saying,

> Going into middle school and high school I wanted to get into sports and like my parents couldn't like, you know, you had to pay for uniforms and stuff like that. And my parents couldn't pay for it. And so of course I had to start working.

Bertha was not old enough to work when she accepted a cashier's position at the dress shop. She worked after school and on the weekends, accepting payment under

the table. She would, in turn, give the majority of her pay to her parents to cover household costs. Bertha's parents raised their children to be responsible, a lesson they learned as young children in Mexico when, after 1–2 years of formal schooling, their parents removed them from school and sent them to work. Said Bertha, "And then after that, they were told, 'You are going have to work and help support the family.'"

Stephanie worked 30 or more hours a week at a department store, rising in the ranks and finding herself being groomed for management, to take the financial burden off of her mother. However, at school her entrepreneurial mind was also at work. She was called the "cookie dealer," selling homemade snicker doodles to her teachers and classmates. "I had one of these old school tin lunch boxes and I just had cookies in them. I walk around with my little suitcase thingy and I was the cookie dealer. I was even selling them to teachers." The rationale for Stephanie's working ways stems from her desire to free her mother, already working several jobs, from having to provide for her daughter. She took great pride in her ability to work full time at the department store and make additional monies at school. She was, in her own mind, self-sufficient.

The Cost of Higher Education

The most often discussed rationale for working was the rising cost of college attendance, a cost that the students knew was virtually an impossible expense for their parents. As John said,

> For college, for instance, my college I'm paying everything, everything, my loans, I'm paying everything. I've been working ever since I was like 17,

> always working and saving like that. I've got money saved up. My dad, he has money too. He could pay for school. I got scholarships and loans and stuff so I'm going to pay my own stuff. I'm paying for all of my stuff. I'm not really worried about him paying for it. But if it ever does come to that, [John mimics a conversation between him and his father]. "Can't you pay for my college stuff?" "Yea, I'll pay for it once you are out of money."

This quote demonstrates John's sense of the cost of college and his sense of responsibility to cover those costs. Research (e.g., Hearn, 1984, 1991; Kahlenberg, 2006; St. John, Asker, & Hu, 2001) has shown that students are most deterred from applying to and attending institutions of higher education because of escalating costs. In the case of the participants in this study, income served as the largest barrier to college attendance. They spoke of the jobs they found to defray costs, they spoke of searching for financial aid, and they highlighted the selection process of institutions based on the funding they were offered.

In this final section on income as a barrier to higher education, the students' particular awareness of the cost of education as well as their definition of cost is introduced to demonstrate the size of this nearly insurmountable barrier. At the end of their first semester, the students expressed pride that their parents were not required to pay. Bertha said, "But financially I've been able to get by. My parents haven't had to honestly pay for anything." In chapter 6, the specific strategies that used to overcome the financial barrier to higher education are discussed in depth in the To Act section. However, the very real cost of education plays a constant role in the lives of these students.

Even before getting to college, the cost of preparation is high. The following example from John highlights the hidden costs associated with higher education:

> I think the SAT is $40 or $50. I didn't know about this but the guy from [name of university] told me this, like if you get free or reduced-price lunch the school will pay for you to take the SAT. The school never told us, I found out from the guy at [name of university]. The counselor never told us, I don't know why. Our counselor is really bad. I paid twice. I wasted $100 on the SAT. I found out about the free SAT and I didn't believe it. So I went up to him, I asked is it true you can get a free SAT if you get free and reduced-price lunch and she was like yea, are you free or reduced-price lunch, and I was like yea. I found out about the free SAT, that's when I decided to take it again, that's the time I took it at the local high school.

A second example of paying for testing occurred during John's university orientation. He was told he must take a placement test in math and in writing. Each test cost John $50. He failed the writing test, which he later found out was an unnecessary test, given his choice of major. When he questioned the testing representative, the man replied dismissively that the test was only $50, to which John replied that he did not have a parent footing the bill, and the $50 was coming from his pocket.

Paying for school meant more than finding a summer or after-school job. The students looked to financial aid as a deciding factor in whether they would be able to attend college. The assumption, for all of them, was that their family would not be able to help them financially. In some cases, such as John, loans and grants were the result of his family's precarious income, "I got a lot of loans and grants because my family income is like pretty low." Michelle also spoke of securing loans, though in her case, her siblings before her provided the example of how to attend college.

> There were a lot of setbacks wanting to come to the University. My dad retired and my mom didn't really have a high income career. So I thought, okay, how am I going to pay for this? I ended up applying to about 10 million scholarships throughout senior year and junior year. I kept applying and applying. I was actually awarded a lot of them but it still wasn't enough. So now I'm taking out loans to be able to afford everything

For others, such as Lorena and Nur, support came not in the form of much need money, but instead as love or external resources. Wrote Lorena,

> And that's what my mother said to me. She's like, you know we don't have that much money, she's like, if you're going to go away I'm not going to be able to help you. You know, what I did for your brother I could do because he was here but not because he was somewhere else. I was like, okay, I understand that.

Nur and Amore's parents pay for their rent, Bertha's mother bakes food to fill her daughter's freezer, and Michelle's mother covered room and board for Michelle's brother because he attended college closer to home. Each student's parents helped to cover costs, either through financial, emotional, or outside resources. The income barrier to higher education, in this last example, might have contributed to Stephanie's academic transformation when afforded a chance to return to the University. She feared, due to having failed the first semester, that she might be required to return the financial support she received to attend the University. She wrote, "I started to think, am I going to have to pay back tuition, because that would suck."

Wealth

Wealth, as a constitutive element of a student's culture of class, is composed of three areas: (a) citizenship, (b) cultural capital, and (e) parents' educational achievements. During the coding process, wealth was often inferred in the student's description of their childhoods, their sense of their parents' educational achievements, and the family's decision to immigrate to the United States.

Moving to the United States

The decision to move to the United States came at varying costs to the families in this research. The students spoke passionately about their parents' journey to find a better life. Bertha referred to her parents' struggles in Mexico to find employment and to establish a life, a life that would provide unparalleled opportunities for their children. She described her parents' journey in the following statement:

> So then of course they struggled, I mean, so much to get over here to the other side. When you hear stories of parents or when people walking across the desert. …Literally my parents walked across the desert.

The lure of better job opportunities in the United States was enough to encourage John's father to initially cross the border illegally. John described his father's journey:

> When he came back he came back under the hood of a truck, in the trunk of a car, he and some other guys so they were all, like, he had to come back in like in the back of a trunk, they only had that much for air space, and yea, they come back, and whenever he came back he lost his license in the trunk, whenever he came back they were dropped off in a room full just like full of people just sitting there waiting for people to come. They were waiting to get paid. They have to pay first so they can release them. They charge, and they wouldn't release them until they got the money. Yea, this was the third time. But once, 'cause, this was in Dallas and my dad's cousin who lived about 10 minutes away. My dad kept saying take me to my cousin, I'll give you the money, I ain't going to stay here. His cousin paid, I think it was $200 but now it is $1,500 or $2,000 now, I think. Back then it was $150 or $200, but my dad had no money on him and he saw how it was to be, it was horrible, they had some security. They wanted their money.

Although less vivid in her description, Lorena described her mother's entry into the United States after a long bus ride from her hometown in Mexico. All of the parents who immigrated here from Mexico were granted citizenship under the Immigration

Reform and Control Act signed by President Reagan in 1986. The act legalized nearly 3 million undocumented workers in the United States.

The United States is often called the Land of Opportunity. In the case of these families, the nomenclature appears to hold true. In leaving their birthplaces, these parents sought a new home where work was plentiful and their children would prosper in the education system. It is in Nur's story of leaving behind the only home she knew in Malaysia to come to the United States and join her mother and new stepfather that the opportunities these parents hoped for their children became realities. Sharing stories about her grandmother, Nur recalled saying goodbye and the older women assuring her there would be better opportunities in America. One might only guess that opportunities came in the form of access to resources and better education.

Cultural Capital

According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital is acquired through the transmission of knowledge from parent to child, typically, and provides students an added advantage in the academic environment. Exposure to resources, such as new books and school supplies; cultural experiences, such as travel and museum visits; and the extent of a parent's education all contribute to an individual's collective cultural capital. Although the resources provided each of these students while growing up ranged from hand-me-downs to newly purchased items, they were often achieved at great cost to the parent. All of the students spoke of growing up in meager

surroundings. However, some, such as Stephanie, spoke of feeling spoiled in comparison to the life their parents led. She spoke of her collection of Barbies in comparison to her mother's early days cooking for her large family or picking blueberries when she first arrived in the United States. Bertha shared stories of her trips to large, chain stores to purchase new shoes for her siblings, a sharp comparison to her mother's own childhood growing up without any shoes.

Perhaps these students learned innovation and creativity in the absence of toys and games. Their relationships with their siblings, in nearly all of the cases, were strong as a result of being each other's playmates and entertainment. However, it was sometimes this lack of access to cultural opportunities, such as attending plays or musical performances, that distinguished these students from their peers. They did not wear the fashion trends, they did not live in the nicest neighborhoods, and they did not drive new cars or play video games on their new computers. Yet, they survived. Bertha described this experience with particular eloquence,

> It was hard at first, you see all these kids that are in style and wanting the bell bottoms and things like that. Over the years I've realized, well, duh, they didn't have the money. They would say, "What are you talking about, you have shoes already?" I would have to deal with it, you know, just get over it. I wasn't going to be able to get what I wanted. I would have to be happy with my Payless shoes and my Wal-Mart shoes. I guess now I'm thankful that I had shoes to begin with because my mom, literally, she didn't get shoes until later on [in her life]. So I was like, "So what did you wear when you were like 7, 6, or 5?" She was like, "Literally nothing, literally barefoot. That is why I have feet problems now. I have aches and pains because I didn't wear any shoes."

John also wrote of his family's lack of cultural capital, although for him, a cousin bridged the distance between his family's cultural resources and the knowledge required of him to successfully apply to college.

> So I didn't know there was a deadline. And also my brother didn't apply until a few weeks before classes began. I didn't have someone above me who went through it. So first I was doing it myself. So I went and talked to [my cousin] and she was like, "You haven't done your application?" It was a Sunday and the application was due on Wednesday.

Additionally, John's Internet access was slow due to old technology. John paid for the Internet connection from his summer earnings, a luxury his father would not have been able to provide. The computer was a cast-off from a redecoration of his boss' home, a throwaway that she instead gifted to John.

Cultural capital came in different forms in the minds of these creative students. For Michelle, growing up in a dangerous neighborhood meant sleeping on the floor to be clear of stray bullets. Rather than consider the negative ramifications of such an existence, she talked about the stories the kids used to tell to fall asleep and the feeling that they were surrounded by millions of fans, because the family could not afford air conditioning. Nur talked about her grandmother's willingness to be scorned by her neighbors in Malaysia in order to provide her granddaughter a better education at the Convent School. They all told stories of a parent who encouraged them to pursue their education, to focus in school, and to make a better life. After all, that is why each of the students' parents entered the United States.

Parents' Education

A common theme, the "inside job," developed in several of the students' stories. John's father told each of his children to work hard in school so they one day could find a job in an office, away from the hot sun and manual labor that he, as an

uneducated man, was forced to endure. John's parents, collectively, had 3 years of formal schooling. Bertha's father refused to allow his oldest son to drop out of high school to find work, insisting that at the least his children must graduate from high school to better their chances of finding a good job. Bertha's parents, collectively, had 2 years of formal schooling. Lorena's mother was told she was not smart enough for her parents to incur costs for her education beyond the sixth grade, a grim reality of the Mexican school system.

Michelle's father spent a few years in community college before quitting school to take a position working for the public transportation service. Michelle's mother received her GED after dropping out of seventh grade and having a family. Michelle helped her mother study when Michelle was still in elementary school. Nur's mother was the first woman in her family to attend postsecondary education and earned a degree in secretarial studies. Amore's mother put her education on hold until after the birth of her two daughters, earning a bachelor's degree and recently a master's degree. Amore's father graduated from high school. Stephanie's mom had no formal education because she was the youngest daughter in a large Vietnamese family who relied on the children's labor to earn a living. Her father was also put into farm service at a young age.

All 7 participants' families raised children who, in nearly every case, were the first to attend an institution of higher education. The research (e.g., Valencia, 1997; Webster, 2003) has suggested this is a nearly insurmountable odd in the lives of students already labeled at risk because of low family income. Despite these odds and

their collective lack of knowledge about formal education, these parents raised children who knew how to work hard, to focus on their academics, to appreciate their family, and successfully to advance in their education to create a better life.

Not only did they succeed with the young men and women who participated in this study, they succeeded with their other children as well. All of Michelle's siblings attended higher education; several received graduate degrees. One of Bertha's brothers graduated from a 4-year institution and another from community college. These parents recognized that their lack of formal education prevented them from achieving all of their dreams. So they encouraged their children to succeed. Michelle described her mother's encouragement in the following passage:

> My mom noticed that most of her children were going to college so she thought, "You know, I should try to become more educated, too." She dropped out in seventh grade, and I actually had to help her once she wanted to get her education. I was 6 years old, she was 48, and we would recite the Star Spangled Banner together and I'd slowly read the questions off the practice exam she had, questions like "How many stars are on the U.S. flag?" I think she could have done a lot more with herself, career wise, but she couldn't talk English and was unfamiliar with a lot of the U.S. customs. Now, she does speak some English but it's not very fluent. She has gotten way better since she first moved here. She once told me, "I got my GED, now I know you can do way better. You've been through grade school and can be anything you want to be."

Social Relationships

The influence of individuals on the lives of the students contributes to their culture of class. These relationships are important influences on the happiness and success of each of these students. The relationships the students had with parents,

siblings, extended family, teachers, friends, and social organizations made significant contributions, either positive or negative, on the student's environment.

Parents

Speaking of the money she gave her family to purchase a car, a participant said, "Because $2,000 is nothing compared to what they've provided me, what they've given me you know? Not even financially, just to have their support." For the students in this study, parents provided unending support and encouragement, though in a few examples, that support was not consistent from both parents. The role of the parent in the lives of these students was as disciplinarian, teacher, coach, and guide.

> My parents, everything just goes back to my parents. They instilled it in us, whatever you do, give it all you can. You know I mean? I've seen in order for you to get anything out of life you have to put in a certain amount of dedication, in order to get something back. And so then that's why I guess I do what I can to follow, you know, wanting to be successful at something. I know it takes a certain amount of dedication to be able to reach that point and reach whatever and be successful.

In some cases, the parents provided the stability their children needed to be successful, whereas in other cases the parents were a source of frustration and occasionally irritation. When Nur moved to the United States and lived with her mother for the first time, the two women had to learn how to coexist.

> We didn't get along in the beginning because I guess a lot more freedom in Malaysia. My grandparents and my aunts they let me decide my own thing, but in [city name] with my mom and my stepdad, I have to do my homework in my room, I can't do it in front of the TV. I don't know. There's nothing wrong with that. So we didn't really get a long but it took me like a while to really respect her.

In the case of Stephanie, her parents no longer speak to one another, but her mother continues to work to provide for her estranged husband. The unique relationships that these students hold with their mothers and their fathers are perhaps best explored separately.

Mother. To hear Stephanie speak of her mother is to understand how important the woman is to her daughter.

> I'm a lot like her. She's really emotional…and I am too. I over analyze everything. I overreact to everything. I don't know. I feel bad a lot about the things I do. Like I feel like I wasn't sensitive enough or something like that. And she's a lot like that. But she's really independent. And I think I always wanted to be really independent. I don't like depending on people. My mom kind of taught me that. She didn't verbally say it of course, but she did everything herself. She taught herself how to drive; she drives herself to the hospital when she is sick. She does everything herself. She took care of me and my brother, she helped, if not did everything for us really. She drove me everywhere I had to go. When I had to be picked up at 2 a.m. in the morning she came and picked me up. And she taught me that I'm complete already, with just myself. I don't need anyone else to feel comfortable or whole. I, alone, am enough already, anyone and anything else are all privileges. That's probably the greatest thing she's ever taught me. She was a really good mom. She is a really good mom.

In talking of her mother, Stephanie exposed her inner dialogue, a need to feel protected while simultaneously defending her independence, a trait she learned perhaps from her mother. Stephanie remembered listening to her mother brag about her daughter's accomplishments to her friends though her mother never directed her behavior.

> I knew [she needed to do well in school], even though my mom never told me to do well, I knew, I mean every mom of course wanted their kid to do well. And I just wanted that for her. I don't know, because my brother, he didn't finish school.

The young woman and her mother held their composure when Stephanie left for college, one letting her most precious child go out into the world and the other leaving her mother behind to fend for herself.

Many of the students spoke fondly of their mothers. Bertha spoke of spending evenings with her mom rehashing their day, talking about work, school, or whatever else was going on in the world. Despite her ignorance of the classroom experience, Bertha's mother always would ask her daughter about her schoolwork and make sure that things were going well. John's relationship with his mother followed the strict tradition of a patriarchal household. His mother never learned English, never worked outside of the home, and never learned to drive. John described this as his father's "old-fashioned" ways, which often resulted in physical discipline at the hands of his father and the intervention of his mother.

Michelle, Amore, and Lorena spoke lovingly and often of their mothers, women who unknowingly influenced the lives of their young daughters. Lorena spoke of her mother's strength and support despite the violence inflicted by her husband. Michelle's mother also provided the "quiet in the storm" presence, a gentle woman who worked hard to receive her GED, to set an example for her children that they can achieve anything they wish with hard work and determination.

> My mom was the one who was our savior; she was our fun. She would take us to the pool in the summer and was the one who prevented us from getting too emotionally distressed by our dad. She was an escape, so to speak.

Amore's mother also suffered at the hands of an emotionally abusive husband. She worked several jobs and attended night school in preparation to leave her husband

and raise her young daughters. The strength of these women in the face of hardship and abuse could not be missed in the words of their children, a testimony to their skills as parents and as role models.

Father. The positive influence of a father came late in Nur's life. She was 13 when she moved in with her mother and stepfather, but she quickly bonded with her parents and in particular her new father. During her transition to the American school system, Nur struggled with simple tasks, such as opening her locker. Her stepfather brought home a lock for Nur to practice on at home. Her mother's husband was the only father Nur has ever known. She never had a relationship with her biological father, who left her mother shortly after she gave birth to Nur. When she showed me pictures of her family, she pointed out her brother, her mother, and the man she called Dad, her mother's second husband.

Four of the young women who participated in this research suffered abuse at the hands of a father, either directly or indirectly by witnessing the abuse of their mother or siblings. In all 4 cases, the women cited alcohol as the main factor in their fathers' abusive behavior. The strength these young women showed in sharing their experiences, and in particular, in acknowledging their fathers' illnesses as the root of his behavior, sets them apart. In the following examples, Michelle, Stephanie, Lorena, and Amore spoke of the abusive they suffered at the hands of their fathers and the lasting impression that abuse made on their lives.

> Since my dad was an alcoholic, he was very abusive towards us. The older children got physical abuse, and the young three, which is me and my two brothers, got the verbal abuse. I'm very strong now when it comes to dealing with my emotions since I had to start at such a young age. I take nothing in

> my life for granted, and never put others down. It wasn't easy but I got over what my dad did to me. I forgave him. That's how a lot of my childhood days were spent; it was really tense all the time. When my dad would come home from work, the house had to be perfectly clean, we'd all have to be quiet cause anything could trigger him. I could be sitting down coloring and he'd find a reason to yell at me. He was our discipline.

Michelle's father is now sober. However, because of his "abusive ways," Michelle and her father do not have what she referred to as a "dad/daughter relationship." Although she forgave him for his behavior and spoke fondly of her father, the wounds are permanent reminders of her childhood. Amore recounted a similar experience with her father, quickly retreating to her room when the heard the "rumble" of his truck coming down the road.

Lorena's father was also an abusive alcoholic. However, her story does not end with his sobriety nor does it carry the same hurt of Michelle's. Her father was sober by the time his youngest daughter was born. He sobered as the result of an ultimatum posed by his wife. She left him and took their two children back to Mexico, enrolled the kids in school, and threatened never to return. He followed her to Mexico and swore things would be different. They returned to the United States, and Lorena's mother sought support from community group that dealt with family addiction. Lorena's father's sobriety might not have lasted if his liver had not perforated. He was rushed to the hospital, dying from his disease. Lorena was quite young when he first became sick, and although she was "daddy's little girl," the man she knew slowly retreated into a chronic state of depression. He died when Lorena was in high school.

Stephanie's experience was entirely different than Michelle and Lorena's. Her father lost everything as a result of his disease. Once a successful business owner, he slowly deteriorated into a drunk. She recalls early childhood experiences, on the surface positive memories of having lunch at Chucky E. Cheese, only to see through adult eyes her father's motivation was the beer they served. She stopped speaking to her father in her early adolescence. She recalled the incident that turned her against her father, though she quickly pointed out that she is merely indifferent towards him. Stephanie believed that her father did not deserve any strong emotions, good or bad.

> I don't remember the date, I think it was fourth grade. My parents got into a really big fight and my mom cried for hours. I couldn't understand. How could someone make someone cry that much? So I think that was it.

Siblings

The older or younger brothers and sisters in the lives of these students played the most significant role in opening the door to higher education opportunities. The siblings looked out for one another when the family lived in tougher neighborhoods. They succeeded in their own education such that the students in this research had a role model to follow.

Bertha credited her brothers with her understanding of the college admissions process. She watched her older brother struggle through the admissions process, seek funding to cover the costs of attendance, and learn the ropes of his 1st year. Rather than follow in his footsteps, Bertha knew, as she said, "If he can do it, why can't I?" She pushed herself to go further than he, to apply and receive admission to a more

selective institution. Since her brother had succeeded in being admitted to college, Bertha knew there was no other option for her; she would also go to college, the second in her family to matriculate.

Siblings played a large role for some of the participants. The siblings were role models, compatriots, and surrogate parents. In some cases, they were subtle influences, whereas in others they changed the course of the student's life. Lorena called her siblings her "resources," the people she turned to with questions about school or life. In her siblings there was always someone to turn to who knew the nuances of her life and her environment. Michelle's brothers also served as resources; they counseled their younger sister on which courses to take and which colleges to consider. Her youngest brother turned her on to the band, a suggestion that shaped Michelle's high school and early college career. Without siblings ahead to pave the way, several of these students would have been left to navigate the world of college admissions on their own. That may be why Amore already talks to her younger brother about the value of good grades and the importance of working hard in school.

Teachers

All of the students mentioned the important role their teachers played both in their academic life and their growth as individuals. As role models and mentors, the teachers influenced each student's sense of confidence, goals, and perception of college readiness. As classroom leaders, the students recognized their teacher's ability to make subjects interesting, to pull them from their shells, and to recognize their

talents. However, the students' interactions with their teachers were on occasion negative.

In nearly every story, a teacher had a positive influence on the student's life. In the following examples, teachers raised the student's sense of belonging and recognized his or her untapped potential. Nur recalled two teachers in high school who recognized her potential, despite her difficulty with the English language.

> He saw my potential. I was the quiet girl, still freshman year, I would sit by myself. But in this one was a regular geography course. He moved me to honors. He recommended me to my counselor to move me up to [gifted and talented], accelerated classes.

Because of her teacher's recommendation, Nur was moved to the advanced classes, and her GPA increased as a result of the weighted averages. Without his intervention, Nur would have continued with her lower level courses, not graduated as valedictorian, and perhaps not learned what she needed to attend the University. Nur credited her teachers with aiding her transition to the American school system, spending time with her after school or during breaks to work with her, and recognizing potential behind her quiet, shy façade.

Stephanie shared a similar, positive experience with a teacher who recognized her inner potential. Stephanie was the editor of the newspaper, a job she took very seriously. Her journalism advisor was the first to recognize Stephanie's skill as a writer.

> Miss Duncan was the first person ever to um well; it makes sense for her be the first person ever [deleted] to say I had a really good news writing technique. She was always a good supporter. She taught me everything. And then she had to go.

Stephanie's obvious disappointment over the loss of her advisor left her searching for a new role model in her teacher's replacement, a less prepared and talented English teacher. Her disappointment quickly turned to disdain and Stephanie's devotion to the paper evaporated. The new advisor was enough to make Stephanie hate the paper she once loved and walk away from the editorship.

Additional comments from the students speak of the negative influence of teachers on their lives. Lorena talked about a teacher who, concerned that her student may not pass a placement exam, recommended that she retake the class the following year. Although disappointed, Lorena took the course during the summer to avoid falling behind and began the year with her classmates. Lorena's disappointment over her teacher's assumption that she was behind soon gave way to understanding. If she did fail the course, she would forever have an F on her high school report card. "Now I see that, I guess if she thought it was going to affect me in the long run it was a good decision to make, even though I did not feel it was a good idea at the time." Later in her story Lorena described the attributes of a "bad" teacher as follows:

> Much more active and they were more disciplinary. They were the type of teachers you respected because you liked them. So they didn't have to keep telling you be quiet, sit down in your seat, they would say it once and you would do. And then, you know, you keep listening in class, and you don't jump around, and that would be okay with them. I guess most teachers were the ones that related more to us, they were easy going but they were still enforcing.

The value of good teachers played a large role in the student's desire to learn, to push their limits, and to succeed in the classroom. Though they spoke of many personality traits, the students focused most often on a teacher's ability to make

learning interesting, to recognize the hard work of the students, and to believe in the students talents. Several of the students mentioned how a teacher's endorsement of college impressed upon them the need to apply themselves to their academics.

Friends

The lives of these students were equally influenced by the friends who surrounded them. The idiom, "Friends are the family we choose," holds true for these students. They turned to their classmates, their boyfriends, and their "posse" in times of play and in times of sorrow. They escaped the struggles of home to the freedom of friendship. Many of them talked about hanging out with the "nerds," the smart kids with whom they spent their school day. Bertha's peer group was the students she saw in her classes, though she admitted she spent more time playing with her brothers and the neighborhood kids. However, her association with the "nerd group" made her a prime candidate when new scholarships crossed the desk of the college counselor. Lorena's best friend was also her mechanism for escape from the chaos of her home life.

> They had more money than I did; she had more money than I did. The parent situation, just like the house they lived in, having both parents, ah, the jobs that the parents had was completely different than mine. But um. They were just really nice. I always went to family functions with them. I felt like I was part of their family and so I was close to them.

Lorena's best friend was her calm in the storm, and the two remain close now that they are in college.

Michelle's friends served a similar purpose to Lorena's description of her best friend; they were the people she turned to for guidance, for understanding, and for laughter. When she thought back on high school, she said she remembered most of her friends.

> My friends were always there. It wasn't like we'd all like the same things and do the same things or dress the same way. We were all so different, but together, it was perfect. I was always able to get…diverse opinions and perspectives through my friends.

Michelle's current roommate in college is her best friend from high school, a tribute to the bond between the two young women. Nur also turned to her peers as role models, mimicking her own behavior on their more gregarious or unrestricted behavior. She learned to be outgoing by watching the members of the student council and went from being the "shy, quiet Malaysian girl" to the outgoing, dancing girl who delivered her valedictorian speech in front of hundreds of people.

Nur's story focused primarily on a young woman she met when she was a 1st-year high school student. This young woman was a senior, the valedictorian, the girl that everyone seemed to love and admire. Nur said of this young woman after meeting her for the first time, "I was like wow. I want to be just like her. She is so cool. She was a role model for me. I still talk about her." Nur also spoke of her current roommate, a woman she met in high school and the friend she credits with giving Nur the opportunity to be accomplished. Her friend, Andrea, picked her up for school and drove her home after their student council meetings, enabling Nur to make friends and participate in extracurricular activities. In her valedictorian speech, Nur

recognized Andrea's role in her life as a turning point in her transition to the American school system and particularly for drawing Nur out of her shell.

Stephanie's friendships are perhaps better categorized as surrogate families. In her story she mentioned her primary "Posse" or group of three or four boys with whom she spent the majority of her free time. She also mentioned the rift between herself and one of her most beloved friends, a rift that continues to heal to this day. Stephanie's friendships are, like those examples mentioned above, based on peer influence and unconditional support. She turned to friends with questions about her future (ever fickle), she listened when they told her she was too bright to squander her life as a department store assistant manager, and she applied to college based on one young woman's recommendation. Stephanie's friendships helped her to blossom into a confident young woman despite the hardship at home. She, in turn, relied heavily on these relationships as a strong foundation in her chaotic life. Amore, too, looked to relationships, mainly with her teachers, as a solid foundation from which she safely tested the proverbial waters of high school. In both of these young women's lives, friendships with peers filled the voids left by family. These friendships served as a sense of belonging to something. Stephanie's nomenclature of the Posse holds true for some of the other students as well. These friendships were safe and they were home.

Social Capital

Implied in many of the student's descriptions of their social relationships is the resulting social capital. Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital to describe the value of relationships, belonging to certain social groups, connections that can be traded for added prestige. None of the students spoke of their relationships from a capital perspective. However, the connection between social organizations and social capital is inferred in the following examples.

Michelle joined band at the insistence of her brother but continued in college because of the opportunity to spend time with like-minded individuals. She said of the band,

> It's all the people; they are just so amazing. There's 400 of us and we all enjoy music. Everyone is so fun and outgoing, and when you surround yourself with positive people who enjoy one of the best forms of art, you can't help but feel good about yourself. I think its one of the best organizations on campus, and the football games are out of this world. Performing in front of hundreds of thousands of people is just something I never thought I would do, and I love it. I love it all.

Thus, her participation with the band afforded her unparalleled access to the football games as well as a strong social network that spread across campus, majors, genders, and interests.

Nur spoke of her membership with a group that stresses strong academics and community engagement. She described the group as follows:

> It's a professional fraternity and we do social, academic, and community service. …One of the main reasons why people join is because of the people. The people are different. They are academically inclined. Really, like, one of my brothers, she is working on a quadruple major, business honors, management, psychology, and something else. They are really, really

> accomplished [and] academically inclined. Just being like connected with someone, I know that I can count on [my pledge brothers] if I need something.

Nur's experience, similar to that of Michelle's experience with the band, offers both a sense of belonging as well as access to a strong network of peers who share her value system. The opportunity to build social capital is based primarily on social relationships. Nur and Michelle belong to organizations that connect them to individuals across the campus.

Race

The influence of race in the lives of these students varied across stories. They spoke of cultural barriers, such as learning the English language, direct exposure to racism and stereotypes, their family's cultural and religious practices, and "being American." Together, race, culture, and ethnicity formed the students' sense of identity. The implications of race, as a barrier, are widespread and intertwined with the influence of class.

Language

The English language was discussed by nearly every student. Whether they were speaking of their understanding of the language, the translation skills they developed to assist their parents, or the barriers implicit in not speaking English, each student mentioned language as a barrier. John shared a recent story about his father that demonstrates the social value of language and the connection, in these stories, of language with race. The story began with John's father, Samuel, working on the sod

farm that employed him only during the growing season, laying him off each winter to save financial costs. The farmer's son, according to Samuel, was lazy and incompetent. On that particular day the farmer's son instructed Samuel to cut the dying grass along with the rest of the sod, reasoning perhaps that he would sell the dead grass along with the healthy. John's father muttered an expression, in Spanish, under his breath in frustration over the poor decision (roughly translated by John, Samuel said, "You always think you know everything"). The farmer's son questioned John's father, "What did you say?" Samuel told him, in broken English. Enraged, the farmer's son fired him, presumably for insolence at questioning the farmer's judgment. Samuel went to the office to pick up his things and the farmer's wife asked him what happened. He shared the story with her and she said, "What, can't you speak English?" Samuel left the office, unemployed, but righteous in his contempt for the farmer's son. The issue, reasoned the farmer, was that John's father refused to speak English. However, the more pressing issue is that Samuel was not in the social position to question the authority of the White farmer. His inability to speak English "proved" their case.

In other examples, the students spoke of translating their first language into English either for their parents or for their own learning. In the case of translation, some of these students had to learn to speak and read in English. They spent years, sometimes up to fourth grade, in ESL classes. They struggled to speak the unfamiliar language, spending extra time with their teachers and practicing at home with their siblings. In John's home, the rule was that you must speak Spanish, thus preventing

him from practicing his new skills with his siblings and restricting his learning to the classroom. Several of the parents, Stephanie and John's included, still do not speak English. Speaking of her mother, Stephanie said, "No. A lot of hand motions. She can kind of get by, but she doesn't know specifics."

The student's own journey through the American education system dictated an understanding and proficiency in English. Nur shared a story of being sent to a separate room during state testing where she spent an afternoon with other "foreign" students. Bertha also spoke of learning English, speaking to her older siblings to practice her language skills, and in particular working with her older sister, who is severely developmentally delayed. Language as a barrier to education, in general, was a first step for some of these students to acclimating to the educational system and overcoming stereotypes.

> I think that since a lot of people get the idea Hispanics…what can they do? They can't even talk English. I think that's where I get the, "No, a lot of us are bilingual. A lot of us try hard." Some people, like the people that like migrate into the U.S., they're all not a bunch of dumb like people that just want to work somewhere.

Lorena likened her bilingual status to maintaining her culture while partially assimilating into the pervasive English-speaking culture of America. Language played a large role in a student's cultural identity.

Culture

Michelle's story began with a description of culture that resonates with the other student's experiences. Like Samuel, John's father who experienced cultural clashes over language, Michelle mentioned the need for diversity in social interaction.

> Being Hispanic means being able to give others a sense of diversity. You know? Imagine if this school was just all White, how it once was. There would be no way to learn or develop from others who are not like you. You wouldn't be exposed to other perspectives and different points of view and unique life stories. Hispanics bring that cultural type of environment where we learn through each other's past experiences and appreciate having each other as a way to learn about differences in society and customs other than our own.

The cultural environment that Michelle mentioned varies from student to student, but in general appears in the language spoken at home, the dishes prepared for special occasions, and the sense of racial solidarity that some of students described as peer groups. Bertha said she "starved herself," figuratively speaking, to have room for her mother's homemade dishes when she returned home for holidays. John's mother prepared homemade tamales. The student's culture often filled the home. On some occasions, the student's culture was expressed from an environmental perspective.

Losing culture was also discussed. Interacting with peers who could not speak their "native" language or assimilating completely and "acting White" were cited by some students as examples of cultural loss. When Nur first moved to the United States she was among the minority for the first time in her 13 years of life. Moving from Malaysia to the Untied States, she attended a school where 2% of the students were Asian. She began to lose her language without a single Malay friend with whom to speak. Stephanie spent her young life growing up in a predominantly Vietnamese

circle, though she was raised to “be American” rather than as a traditional Vietnamese daughter. Stephanie described her experience of “being American” in the following example:

> My mom wanted, she's very adamant about us being very American. I'm very whitewashed. I have very few Vietnamese friends, or Asian friends at all. And she made sure I was as American as possible. So a lot of TV, I hung out with a lot of the neighborhood kids, luckily my older brother spoke a lot of English to me. I don't know, I think, I think she assumed it would be easier for us because we're in America.

Stephanie’s mother’s rationale for raising her children as Americans, rather than focusing on their cultural heritage, exemplifies the plight of many immigrants. If you raise your child in your cultural heritage you run the risk of them not finding success in America. At the core of the argument over being a “real” American is the influence of stereotype and racism.

Stereotype and Racism

Stephanie’s example of racism, as recalled years later, identifies the key problems with cultural assimilation and stereotypes in America today. The students learned and absorbed the lesson that to be and act American, for example to speak and understand the language, was to be more successful.

> When I was in sixth grade, the month of March, during my grandfather's funeral, I realized how much racism hurts. I was in Stockton, CA, at a funeral home with the rest of my family, with a lot of young children around. One of my aunts asked me to take them outside for some fresh air or just to lighten up their spirits. The kids ended up laughing and running around a bit, and I watched over them. Maybe a couple of minutes into it, a middle-aged, Caucasian woman, asked, "Are you from Vietnam or some other third world country?" And I replied, "Well, we're Vietnamese" and she said in her condescending manner, "Oh, no wonder." That was the moment that I

> realized, "Wow, adults can be just as stupid as children." Those emotions mixed with my grandfather's death were really hard for me. It took me quite awhile to forget that day, but every once in awhile it comes up. I've had some unfortunate racist remarks thrown at me, but that first one takes the gold for me. I think maybe that woman made me feel embarrassed a bit about being Vietnamese. Plus, my mom's approach to raising me as "American" as possible has maybe influenced my thinking that maybe acting as "white" as possible maybe the best way to "fit in" or be accepted here. I question why I'm not more into my culture and why I lack Vietnamese friends, but I guess I do know why.

To fit in, Stephanie wrote, dictates behavior.

These students experienced, some in more profound ways than others, brushes with historical racism and profiling; deficit-based assumptions, such as their ability to take an exam or tutor in English; and unfounded cultural bias or stereotyping. Samuel, John's father, felt the sting of stereotype when he questioned the farmer's son, and in John's words, the White man responded, "He is Mexican, what does he know?" Lorena and her roommate, a Salvadorian woman, swapped stories from their experiences in doctor's offices:

> She's like, "I don't have health insurance," and I was like, "I don't have health insurance either." So she's like, "So I go to these clinics and I swear they ask like ten times, are you pregnant? Do you think you might be pregnant? I feel like they are just interrogating me." And I'm like, "I know what you mean and I hate it. I hate going. They don't know me, I'm valedictorian of my class and you're asking me if I'm pregnant. Come on!"

The doctor's assumption of their race and perhaps their lack of health insurance, a result of low socioeconomic status, humiliated and infuriated the young women. The shadow of racial profiling and stereotype dictated not only the student's behavior (to acquiesce to the prevailing culture and "be American" or to retain their native culture and "be different"), but also their sense of justice. Apart from turning to their family

to understand and embrace their culture, some turned to faith and others turned to action. Michelle's entire story radiated with her conviction to be a proud Hispanic woman who would dispel stereotypes and embrace a promising future.

Education

The final constitutive element of class is education. The amount of education received, the courses the students found themselves thrown into, the support of their parents, and the educational environment played a large role in shaping the students who arrived at the threshold of higher education. In regards to education as a barrier in and of itself to higher education access, the issue becomes one of readiness. These students began their educational journal at the base of a stairway with little idea how to move forward. Yet, achieve forward momentum they did, each of them successfully navigating the barriers erected by a lack of income, wealth, and social relationships. They negotiated their racial and cultural identities, fighting for their beliefs. And they fought successfully. They are college students. Although the old adage, "It takes a village to raise a child," rings true, these students faced the most daunting barrier in their own educations and in particular the perception of education held by their parents and society.

Testing

Testing is a prominent barrier in the lives of American schoolchildren. They must pass a standardized exam to advance in their education. These exams often do

not reflect academic achievement, but instead the financial strength of a family. Nur's first experience with standardized exams came during her 1st year in the United States. She arrived on the day of the exam with sharpened pencils and an eager mind. She was dismissed from the exam, despite her preparations, to wallow the day away in the library. Her dismissal tells the bigger story of standardized exams and the value of testing. One year later Nur took the exams and scored high, an important milestone in her education given her lack of fluency in English only a year prior and her newness to the American education system. The other students spoke of failures on exams as a reflection of their ESL status. For many, school marked the first time they were completely immersed in a foreign language.

Academic Preparation and Educational Resources

The students' descriptions of early education revolved around difficulty with language, often resulting in remedial course placements that were well below the student's intellectual abilities, the classroom experience and the skills of teachers, and the work required of them to get through the day. Nur and Lorena both talked about the choice of school—for Nur a parochial school in Malaysia and for Lorena a magnet program for health professions—as a unique influence on their early education. Stephanie spoke of the relative ease of her early education as compared to the serious focus required in high school, when grades began to matter. For Stephanie and Amore, high school math stood as a nearly impassable barrier to graduation. Both young women struggled to understand their precalculus and calculus courses, despite

after-school help from teachers. Said Stephanie, “There's no way I could pass calculus. I don't think I could pass. Math stands in the way for many things.” However, the unwavering spirit of each of the students to overcome academic barriers was reiterated in each of their stories and follow-up discussions. Michelle’s following comments summarize the general experience of students:

> What I remember was that I never gave up in school, at all. Most of my friends would say “I have a cough; I'm not going to go school today.” I would go to school with fevers and pink eye, even though it was bad, but I wanted to go. Why stay home? I would really put the effort into attending school, and I really don’t know where that inner enthusiasm came from. I got an A one day, liked it, and just kept on doing that I guess. I liked being in organizations and participating, and working up a good resume; it all just came from a lot of self-motivation. I even went to school a week early after being hospitalized from a car accident I had gotten into, but I didn’t want to miss all that work and get behind. Some of my friends would say, “No, my throat hurts, I'm going to stay in.” I would be think, “Wow, how can you do that, just miss all of those different days and get Bs or Cs.” That’s what hard work is to me; I just never gave up on myself.

At an early age, the students knew that grades were important. But few knew, until high school, that their good grades were a ticket to a promising future. John recalled a presentation made during his first few weeks as a 1st-year high school student. The counselors stressed grades, above everything else, not to get into college but to receive the much sought-after high school diploma. Lorena does not recall anyone speaking of college until she arrived in high school. Stephanie did not see herself as a college candidate, content with the managerial track for the department store she worked at or the possibility of culinary school. Nur spoke with disbelief about attending an American college, a dream she never dared to consider when she lived in Malaysia.

At some point during their high school experience, each student mentioned refocusing on his or her academic work and setting goals to attend college. The setting of goals, a strategy discussed in chapter 6 in more depth, did result from the student's academic experience. Nur described her thoughts about attending college as follows:

> Wow. I never thought about going to college in America. In the United States when I was in school. I was just going to a little school and I didn't even think beyond [my city]. I didn't have any expectations. I didn't have any goals. I didn't know that like I was going to be here and studying with all these people. It was, I don't know, far away.

Lorena addressed her new college goals in the following comment: "I felt good about everything. But like I felt like I knew who I was, and what I was there for, what my goals were. To go to college and be a doctor." In some of the students' lives, personal goals to attend college were born from their parents' struggles with finances and steady employment. Watching her parents struggle, Bertha and Michelle both thought of college as a way to better not only their lives but also that of their family.

The goals of attending college, whether at the insistence of family members or teachers who recognized a student's potential, were directly affected by the student's access to academic preparation. Some of the students participated in extracurricular activities that enriched their learning experience, including Academic Decathlon, University Interscholastic League, math and debate teams, and opportunities to attend university programs during the summer break. These opportunities represented important learning lessons, providing them the chance to express themselves in a

professional way, experiment with the college environment, and test their accumulated knowledge.

Academic preparation and goals alone were insufficient to secure these students' futures in college. They also needed parents who were invested in their education. In many cases, for a variety of reasons including work commitments and language barriers, the parents of these students were not actively engaged in their children's education.

Parents and Educational Involvement

The parents of these students had a different perspective on education born out of a lack of formal training and an incorrect understanding of the necessity for higher education. They did not value education, in some cases, beyond high school, reasoning that a high school degree was an impressive accomplishment. Their children's goals of one day attending college seemed, in some cases, implausible and unnecessary. In comparison to each parent's limited educational achievements, high school graduation was a stretch. John spoke often about his parents' lack of involvement in his education.

> In my estimation [a parent or parents] would get involved when their child went to school, going to talk to the teacher. My parents never did that. Like going to… What is it called? [Yes] parent teacher meetings, open house, and stuff like that. Normal parents, they would go to talk to the teachers and stuff like that. My parents, they never did that. They were never…it's just they were out of fashion, they didn't see the point. They never really saw a point of going to talk to the teacher. They were like, "Okay, why am I going to talk to her? She doesn't know Spanish." I could translate and stuff like that. My dad never seemed to grasp the whole point of going to see the teacher. They didn't know what they would say when they talked.

His parents expressed frustration over their inability to communicate with the teacher, a problem that Bertha also expressed in her story.

The literature (e.g., Sewell & Shah, 1968; Steelman & Powell, 1993) on parental involvement has maintained that students fare better in the academic environment when they feel supported by their parents. Parents are important advocates in their children's school life, fighting to have their child advance to more rigorous courses and receive fair treatment from his or her teachers. Without a strong parental influence, students were left to their own devices to navigate the education system. Sadly, many watched their classmates' parents engage in their child's learning, often speaking longingly of their own parent's lack of attention in comparison. John said, "Some of my friends, like the other students, their parents were at most every parent-teacher meeting. They really knew what was going on at school. So, like, I was always behind."

The students spoke candidly about their discussions with their parents about their schoolwork. In some cases, because of language or literacy matters, the parents were unable to be of assistance. In other cases, parents shared stories of their own short-lived experience in schooling, blaming their lack of education for their current economic hardships. All of the parents wanted a better life for their children. All wanted, pushed, and prodded their children to graduate from high school.

> When we came over here, my dad was working construction, and he didn't want to see us working out in the sun. He's always worked out in the sun and that's what he does. [Dad told me], "I don't want to see you, we're here in America, get an education." They've always told us go get your education, go through high school and stuff like that. But just high school.

John's father did not understand, as John expressed, the necessity for further education.

However, to many, the steps after high school graduation were entirely unknown. Many pushed their children to consider local community colleges, keeping them close to home. A university seemed entirely too far away and entirely too strange. Despite the student's best efforts to convince their parents of the importance of a 4-year degree, some parents remained skeptical.

> Oh yea, she wanted me to go to [local community college], and I couldn't. I don't know if you went to community college…? My friends and I called [local community college] 13th grade. It's not a school. It's not. What do you do with a degree from [local community college]. It was a pride issue. I was not going to go to [local community college].

Among the 7 students who participated in this research, 3 had parents who completed high school (one finished a GED), 2 had one parent who attended postsecondary education, and 1 student had a parent who finished her bachelor's degree and later a master's degree. College was an unknown variable to these families. Stephanie's mother still does not know that her daughter nearly failed her first semester in college. John's father could not understand why his son would attend a university when, armed with a high school diploma, he could make $14 an hour loading trucks. The drive to do well, therefore, came from inside the students. They set goals, they developed priorities, and they focused their attention on getting into college. Said Michelle, "My parents never said, 'Do your work,' or, 'Let me see your report card.' They never pushed me at all. The effort came from within."

Overcoming Environmental Obstacles

In the review of literature, the discussion of the constitutive elements of class as an intersectional or fluid experience is best described by ecological models. The students in this study have faced various environmental stimuli (income barriers, for example) that influenced their lives. In this final section the environmental, at-large, experiences of the students are listed to give a broad overview of a student's culture of class. Where and how a student was raised serve as a largely unspoken barrier to higher education. While these students rarely spoke explicitly about their perceived barriers to higher education, they did elude to deficits they experienced as a result of their social environment.

Bertha and Michelle spoke of childhoods in neighborhoods where gang related violence and drug activity were not uncommon. They spoke matter-of-factly about relying on older siblings to look after than and hearing the sounds of gunfire as they drifted to sleep. In one particularly vivid memory, Bertha recalled the day her brother was shot because he was misidentified as a member of a rival gang. Michelle remembered, in the same vein, sleeping on the floor to stay out of the direct line of stray bullets that, on occasion, came through the windows. She described her neighborhood in the following excerpt:

> What is a bad neighborhood? I was never allowed to ride my bike around and I always wanted to. I'd see girls in movies and TV riding their bikes (particularly in White neighborhoods), and I'd think, "Why can't I do that, I want to ride my bike like they are." The answer was always, "No, stay inside." The few times I did ride my bike, tinted-window cars would drive up slowly next to me in the middle of the day when the sun was out. It was always really dangerous. We didn't have an AC and the weather in Texas isn't exactly comforting during summers, so you can imagine how that was. When I passed

> to 5th grade, I really appreciated it because we moved into a new house and it had an AC. I don't think everyone gets to appreciate an air conditioned room nowadays. At my old house, the windows had holes in them so we always had an insect problem. This may all seem bad, but I loved my childhood home. I loved it because I was a child, it's all I knew. I hadn't been exposed to anything else, but once I had gotten used to my new house I thought back on how it used to be and said, "How could I have ever lived like that?" It makes me feel like I've lost a little bit of strength now that I indulge in such comforts and sometimes take it for granted.

Acknowledging her "rough childhood," Michelle went on to say that she survived, a possible metaphor for each of these student's experiences. They survived their environments and overcame barriers to arrive, despite the odds stacked against them, at the threshold of promise, a degree from a competitive, 4-year institution of higher education.

Summary

In this chapter, the five constitutive elements of class, identified as a conceptual model called a culture of class, are exemplified by the lives of the students in this research. Their identification of the stumbling blocks in their lives further demonstrates that the model of intersecting elements of class does in fact describe the unique experiences of an individual. This chapter identifies the barriers unique to each student within the framework of a culture of class. In the next chapter, a more fine-grained analysis of the students' journey is presented, specifically, how they navigated the barriers and the resilient strategies they developed to do so.

CHAPTER 6

THE CONNECTIONS

Introduction

The first part of the chapter presents the at-promise factors, those traits or attributes that the students possessed that countered prevailing deficit stereotypes and at-risk assumptions. These attributes include confidence, self-awareness, and faith. The second half of the chapter focuses specifically on the implicit or explicit strategies the students learned or developed on their own to overcome barriers to higher education. These strategies, resilient actions, include the development of meaningful relationships, environmental awareness, and goal setting.

Section 1: At-Promise Factors

The personal, emotional, and psychological attributes of students labeled at risk is key to understanding the development of at-promise factors. Three prominent themes stood out in the research, as they relate to the developmental growth of marginalized students: (a) self-actualization, which includes pride, motivation, and confidence; (b) emotional maturity, which includes self-awareness and realization; and (c) faith, which includes, belief systems, luck, and providence. These three themes, in combination with each another, provide a definition of at-promise factors. In nearly all cases, the students were unaware of the skills they possessed or the way they employed these skills to create successful strategies for navigating barriers.

Self-Actualization

Self-actualization is an aggregate of pride, motivation, and confidence. Pride is an attribute that was spoken about indirectly, referenced by the students or more likely a secondary response to a question. Their eyes would light up, they would straighten in their chairs or lift their chins higher, and they would suggest, with an air to their voices, that they knew they had accomplished great things. Motivation was central to the discussion of "getting over the bumps." Many of the students recognized the length and hardship of their journeys to higher education and spoke of the internal drive or motivation to succeed. Finally, nearly every student wrote about the importance of confidence, both directly and indirectly. They recognized the role that confidence played in their decision to attend college, which for some was an entirely new concept. The following section elaborates further, with examples from the students that highlight the aggregate variable, self-actualization.

Pride. The students rarely spoke of pride for themselves but rather expressed pride as an emotion such as a deep sign when they spoke of a successful sibling or a heroic parent. In their own lives, the students spoke with bright, round eyes about their own accomplishments, careful to acknowledge, at times, they were not trying to brag, but... However, in the following example, Stephanie spoke of pride as a rationalization for working harder and seeking additional support when her academic record was falling at the University.

> Oh. Um. I couldn't imagine going to [Community College]. I couldn't imagine coming back to [City]. I didn't want to be one of those kids who couldn't make it in the real world, they had to come back and live with their mom, and work at the mall or [Amusement Park]. I couldn't do that, couldn't do that.

Prior to this example, Stephanie mentioned a sense of pride at being accepted to the University. As a large, competitive, southwestern university, admission to the institution warranted respect from her peers. Swallowing her pride and returning to her hometown as a failure was more than unthinkable to her. Pride, in this instance, rose above fear and rejection.

Pride is also a component of the student's choice of college. John spoke of his father not know anything about the University. So John shared with his father the strong athletic history and later overheard his father extolling the virtues of the University to his friends in respect to national awards and championships. Equally, Amore, in her quest to prove her value to her father and her family, took a laissez-faire attitude when accepted to the University but filled with pride when she spoke of her friend's responses to her admission.

Finally, pride is reflected in the students' experiences as first-generation college attendees. For some, their families did not recognize the value of attending higher education; for others, their hard work and intelligence garnered the respect and recognition of their schools. Lorena said, "I was just ready to get out of here. And being valedictorian, that's a big accomplishment." For them, however, admission to the University was a major accomplishment, a badge of honor that they displayed with pride when they spoke of receiving the letter of admission or showing their families that they "will make it" in America.

Although none of the students directly mentioned an absence of pride, either spoken out loud about their accomplishments or expressed indirectly in their stories,

very few of them understood the magnitude of their journey to arrive at the University or took pride in the smaller accomplishments along the way. For example, all 7 students speak a second language, and for 4of them, English is not the language they speak at home; all of them graduated at the top of their class; 3 were valedictorians; and each survived the first semester (perhaps in the history of his or her family) in college. John is the only student who spoke directly of pride. Pride motivated him to work harder in his class so his name would posted along with the other high honors students in the office at his high school. Pride, in this case and in several others, gave way to implicit and explicit motivation.

Motivation and dedication. Motivation to be successful was also spoken of indirectly. The students shared stories of siblings who attended education, such as the example below from Michelle:

> It had to do a lot with my family I'd say, cause three of my brothers were valedictorians, my sister graduated top 20, and one was salutatorian. They all went to college and were very successful. As a result, I always felt like I had to meet those standards. That was where some of my motivation came from, being able to prove to my family, hey, just because I'm the young one doesn't mean I can't do as good in school, I either have to do better than that, or just keep it that way. Keeping that [family] name distinguished instead of feeling like we came from all these problems and still didn't accomplish anything. It was about being able to prove to my family that I could be as successful as all my older siblings. There wasn't really anyone that said "Yeah you can make it!" and patted my shoulder or anything like that. It was just, I wanted to do it. I saw how [the University] was ranked fourth in the nation's business schools, and I recognized that it was really close to home, so I thought "Wow, now's my chance, you know? Here's opportunity knocking at the door."

Michelle's family motivated her to be successful. She watched them successfully navigate high school, and she followed in their footsteps.

Lorena's experience was different. Her sister, a constant role model in Lorena's life, dropped out of high school to have a child. However, she returned to high school after the birth of her child and graduated fifth in her class. Lorena spoke about her sister in the following quote:

> She was always reading, she was just always smart. She got into all these schools and I was just like, "My sister is really smart," you know, "I want to be like her." And I guess that's why I looked up to her.

The motivation to work hard and the dedication to the process was instrumental in many of the students' lives. Stephanie spoke of needing to get away from her home as motivation for applying herself in school and in particular to her dedication to attending classes in college. Nur's motivation to be successful came from a promise she made to her grandmother to work hard and stay focused. Each student shared experiences or stories of who motivated him or her, which is discussed in more depth in the second half of this chapter.

Meaningful relationships are instrumental in the development of motivation, perhaps to prove someone wrong, as was the case with Amore, or to live up to a sibling's success, as was the case with Michelle, Bertha, and Lorena. Michelle explained external motivation best when she discussed the proverbs her mother shared with her when she was a child.

> When my mom said, "Duespués de la lluvia, sale el sol," I thought, "Well that's true, after the rain, the sun does come up," and to this day, I've always remembered those words. Whenever something would disappoint me I'd say I'm not going to freak out. Everything's going to be fine, I know it is because…then I'd hear my mom saying those seven little words.

Hearing her mother's words in her head, Michelle developed the motivation to persevere. John shared a similar example in his story—the motivation to read a long book for summer homework. He approached the book as he would a project at work, dividing the amount of time he had to finish the book by the number of pages. His motivation was that he had never read such a lengthy book, because reading in a second language was difficult and slow for him. He wanted to prove to himself and to his teacher that he could overcome his trouble with reading. And he did, by reading approximately 8–10 pages every day of his summer before going to sleep. He completed that book the day before school began.

Confidence. The most often cited example of self-actualization was confidence—the strongest attribute in any of these students' lives. Some described the process of developing confidence through success at school or the support of a peer, parent, or teacher who recognized the student's diligence. Others described confidence that grew from their individual accomplishments, in particular, how much more education they received in comparison to their parents.

John shared the story of an interaction that occurred when he arrived at the University for orientation. He signed up for a math exam and then was told he must take a second exam, in writing, at an additional cost of $50. John registered for the exam, despite the fact he had not studied or prepared, and failed. Not only did failing the exam deplete his confidence, but he also paid a significant sum of money to take an exam he knew ahead of time he would fail. When he returned to the testing administrator, the man suggested that John should not have taken the exam in the first

place. What follows is John's description of his interaction with the administrator and an example of righteous indignation that rebuilt his fragile confidence:

> I hadn't studied. I wasn't even supposed to take it in the first place. If I had studied I would have done better. I really wasn't worried about it. He told me, "Why did you take it, you weren't supposed to take it?" [So I said,] "Well you told me to take it." He was like, "Oh, yea, well don't worry about it." And I was like, "So I paid $50 for a mistake you made?" So I went to talk to the test administrative office, which is on [Road], I came from [Dorm], I went twice during orientation. I would just walk here. [I said,] "I am here to get my money back, I don't care that I failed it, just the whole aspect that I didn't have to take it, [test administrator] told me to take it." I was going to take math to see if I should take [university title] calculus.

John wrote e-mails to the manager of testing services, and upon hearing there was nothing they could do, he wrote an e-mail to her boss, and finally to his boss. They did return his money. Justice served, John's confidence soared.

In the case of Stephanie and Amore, confidence was the result of negative interactions. In Stephanie's words,

> I don't think. I don't, I don't know. Every time I was told I wasn't going to be in something I was like okay. But I just managed somehow to fall into it. I accept rejection just fine. They changed their mind or something. I don't know.

Amore's experience with her father was similar to Stephanie's, though it was her self-confidence that gave her the strength and the stamina to prove to her father that she indeed, would be successful, whether at softball in high school, or receiving admission to the University. Lorena also spoke of developing confidence from a less positive interaction. Her confidence was the result of fear. At her high school a group of young women would deliberately antagonize and then beat up unsuspecting female students. Lorena developed a chip on her shoulder, born from intelligence, to fight

back. She said, “Being scared, that's where I got my confidence. You don't want to be beat up, so don't be picked on.” Although her confidence was the direct result of a survival strategy, Lorena’s own belief in her intelligence, which she used to challenge the bullies, gave her the support she needed to be confident in her interactions with the female gang.

Finally, confidence played a key role in a student’s ability to fit in at school and develop a sense of belonging. Nur talked about her lack of self-confidence when she first arrived in the United States: “I, on the other hand, was just a quiet and shy Malaysian girl among the very outgoing and extroverted students.” However, watching the students around her emanate self-confidence and radiate enthusiasm, Nur started to break from her shell, to stand on the outskirts of these gregarious groupings and eventually to lead the group in dance. She pushed herself to engage others, building her own self-confidence in the process, mentoring disadvantaged students, and selling books door-to-door. In her valedictorian speech, Nur eloquently described her passage from “shy, Asian girl” to confident, American woman as a series of risks and chances.

> Most of us do not like to meet new people, speak in front of groups, or tell about our inner feelings or thoughts when we know they are different. Most of us are afraid to explore something new. But what we don’t know is that if we do not have the courage to step up to the plate, we will never know what great things we might get.

Emotional Maturity

Emotional maturity is captured by self-awareness and realization. Self-awareness is exemplified as recognizing immaturity, understanding the family's struggle, and identifying or appreciating the process of overcoming obstacles and humility. Bertha best exemplified self-awareness in her description of coming to terms with her parents' struggles.

> I was really bad like I remember we were at a boot store and like my sister, my parents were buying my sister boots and like I wanted some so bad just because she was getting some and they of course weren't going to buy them for me.

Sharing the experience at the store, Bertha cringed outwardly at her own lack of consciousness. When she was entering sixth grade it dawned on her that it was not that her parents chose not spoil her; instead, it was that they were barely able to feed the entire family despite their hard work. Humility was born of Bertha's understanding of her parents' efforts. She humbly explained that from that moment forward she understood her role in the family as one of lending a hand. Unlike many other teenagers who reveled in first love or roving the mall, Bertha found employment and turned her pay over to her parents.

> I guess I didn't have the mentality, like, at a certain extent I was kind of like restricted at the same time. I, maybe there are kids out there who do but I never did until I guess I started you know getting more involved in school and doing activities with school. And then I started of course going, growing up, and then I realized a lot of problems would come up in my house, like financially, you know. My parents were struggling.

She vowed one day to graduate from college, recognizing that college was her only ticket to a successful career, so she could return to her parents tenfold the support they provided her.

John shared his understanding of college. He knew that his parents would be unable to support him financially when he applied to college. Bertha explained her understanding of her parent's inability to pay for college. She suggested that her hard work would be the only way to earn scholarships that would pay for her education. Again, this is a distinction from the typical teenagers who, upon hearing they must pay for a test related to their college education, might turn to their parent and ask for the money. John said,

> I told her I was paying my own way, as opposed to someone else, if their dad was paying for it. Hey mom, dad I need $100 to buy tests. But I was paying for it. I paid for the tests, I paid for everything.

The quote above demonstrates a high level of emotional maturity both for his willingness to question authority as well as his comment about not being free to ask his parents. John's comments speak to a growing awareness, on behalf of all of the students, of their parents' hardships and struggles as well as the journey of each parent to arrive in the United States. John's example is particularly profound.

> My parents finally understood that I was not going to listen to them and stay home since I was already an adult. Every time I was told I would not make it, I would always respond to my dad, "You came here when you were 16 and you didn't even know English or how to get around here, why can't I make it when I was born here and I am now 19 and I know two languages?" Although it might seem as if I was disrespectful I was telling this to my dad in more of a joking manner. I decided to continue my education because I am a firm believer of a higher education past high school.

John's own parents, much like Bertha's, walked across the desert to make a better life in the United States for their families. John's point, however, identifies his emotional growth and his respect for his parent's journey. His father walked the first stage of the journey, and he accomplished his goal of providing his family better opportunities; now it is his son's turn to continue the upward movement, beginning his own journey towards equalizing opportunity, college.

In the case of Stephanie, emotional maturity came at the near cost of dismissal from the University. After spending an entire semester alternately missing and traveling home, Stephanie's wake-up call came with a transcript of zeros shortly after Christmas. She realized, holding her transcript, it was a grim possibility that the University would not allow her to return.

> I was home during the winter, and I realized I didn't want to be here. I was like, I don't want to come back to this. I have to go back, I have to. I told myself I had to well in school.

Her realization, her moment of clarity about the choices she made, resulted in her return to the University a different student, a student who had developed a sense of self-respect and emotional growth.

> I didn't respect myself at all last semester. I wasn't doing any good. And I knew I can be. I didn't like myself. I was having lots of fun but when I sat down and thought about it I didn't like myself. I hated not liking myself.

Stephanie, like John, saw the possibility of opportunity lost if she did not take the chance, though unlike John, she nearly lost her opportunity for a college education.

The final example of emotional maturity and growth was shared by Michelle. She possessed a strong sense of maturity as well as strong values that included a

definition of success. Michelle realized that her success and her journey may serve as an example for other minority students, an awareness that set her apart from her peers. She described this phenomenon as values:

> I value being successful. It's one of the main things you can do in life; it gives you a purpose. If you struggle and you go through different phases and you come through, you're successful. That's what I value—being able to get through the challenges and low points in life, so that I'm able to enjoy and appreciate the good points. That goes back to my heritage, where minorities sometimes struggle to be successful. I want to connect my values to helping them make something better of their lives.

Michelle's values and her awareness exemplify the importance of at-promise factors in a student's life. Michelle learned, watching those around her struggle, that she valued success and hard work, dedication, and overcoming struggles.

Faith, and a Little Luck

The final theme of at-promise factors is faith. The students each spoke of their faith both from a religious perspective and as the perception of luck. In the whole, their appreciation of a higher power helped many of them with the process of self-actualization as well as emotional maturity. They took confidence from their faith, they were aware of the many blessings in their lives, and they realized the value of opportunities when presented as a result of their luck.

Religious faith. Lorena spoke frequently of her faith in God. She recognized the ephemeral power of a higher being in her statement, "Man plans and God laughs," suggesting that through her faith she anticipates unforeseen challenges. She described her experience in the following passage:

> So you can plan and things might not turn out that way. But I feel like I'm in [current major] for a reason. I didn't make it to nursing school for a reason. You know? I'm supposed to detour. I'm not sure if it's so I can appreciate being a nurse more or if I'm just supposed to know more things before I go into that to help me grow from there.

Rather than focus on the negative, her dismissal from the nursing program, Lorena draws upon her faith to guide her. Her openness to change is the result of her faith that there is a higher plan for her. She found peace with the possibility of unexpected opportunities.

Bertha also spoke of her strong faith in God, a faith that carried her through difficult times. Bertha developed a strong sense of duty early in her life. She carries that lesson with her to this day, discovering in the process that faith plays a central role in her day-to-day interactions.

> But at the same time like just over the past few years my, I've been, like my relationship with God has gotten so much better. That's definitely helped me get through a lot of things. ...I have this like peace in me, you know, I mean of course I go through stuff too. But I try to live a really peaceful life. You know, I mean try to help out wherever I can, do what I can to, so I can survive. But at the same time I don't want to live this life where its' all about me, me, me. I've learned, as a kid, you know, that I was so selfish and such a brat that its like, I kind of want to not really make up for it, but I guess just from this point on do what I can to help others.

Faith, in Bertha's world, meant the realization of other's needs, placing herself second to those who needed her most.

A different approach to religious faith surfaced in Michelle's story. For her entire life she attended church. However, she began to question the existence of a God who permitted injustice in her life. She wondered, as a child,

> If there is a God, why does my dad treat me like this? Why does he make me hurt inside? Why can't God stop my tears? It was just something I was never going to understand, how God could allow such things in life.

Perhaps it was this intellectual division, the lack of intervention on behalf of her God, that caused Michelle to stop attending church and to focus on taking her life into her own hands. As she matured, she found the compassion to forgive her father, not because it was the Christian thing to do, but because she wanted to forgive him.

Provincial faith. Provincial faith describes the general thankfulness of the students. They do not look to a higher power, per se, but instead give thanks at the local level, the people and places that aided their progress. Said Nur, "In a sense I'm thankful that everything worked out really well." Her thanks, born from years of struggle and hardships, imply a faith in herself as well as humility in the wake of her family's support.

> So I was just lucky. Nothing went wrong. So, I made varsity tennis my 2nd year in high school. So that was lucky. I'm just lucky. Like. All the classes that I took, like, they were the right classes. So, I'm just really, really blessed and God definitely played a role in it. That's how I believe. I'm really grateful.

The line in Nur's comments, above, "The right decisions that I made," involves both an appreciation for God as well as her own role in achieving her dreams.

Luck. Luck is an expression of humbleness in these stories. Each of these students spoke either directly to, or implied, luck. Said Stephanie, "I think I am the luckiest person ever. My mom. Dylan. And financial aid. [The] University keeping me. My health. I don't think my life could be better. Even with everything." Speaking of their successes in terms of luck is the final at-promise factor identified by this

research. To say it was luck, divine intervention, or manifest destiny that dictated their successes, these students rationalize this research. In the end, they do not recognize, in themselves, the due diligence of hard work, desire, and dedication.

Nur's mother referred to her infant daughter as her good luck charm, because after giving birth she was the first woman in her family to be accepted to college. Nur's response was that she was herself blessed and fortunate to have such incredible people around her. Getting the right classes, meeting the teachers who recognized in them the ability to be great, having supportive parents, making friends who pushed them emotionally and socially, or perhaps the pure chance of a family member inquiring about a late application are examples of "luck" as defined by these students.

In the next section, a finer grained analysis of the student's stories is presented. The individual strategies that gave way to action are presented in terms of the student's reaction to his or her environment. The at-promise factors or attributes they possess enabled them to develop resilient strategies to overcome barriers.

Section 2: Resilient Actions and Strategies

Resiliency, in the case of these students, is best exemplified by an action or a theoretical strategy implicit to a student's behavior or thought process. One of the most powerful aspects of this research is that the students did not respond directly to a question about their individual strategies. In talking about their lives they exposed these strategies. They spoke of their responses to financial struggle; their approach (with some trepidation) to college admissions, cost, and survival; their awareness of

environmental disturbances; and in particular the implicit ways they "righted" themselves, as a ship does in high seas.

They spoke of setting and fulfilling goals, building, and benefiting and learning from meaningful relationships with people and institutions. Motivated by fear of disappointing their loved ones, or perhaps by possible failure, they spoke of challenges and growth. And they spoke of their successes and failures, specifically how they coped with and adapted to these new challenges. The following nine strategies are presented offering some insight into how students beat the odds: (a) Be financially aware, (b) desire higher education, (c) be someone or something successful, (d) get out, (e) seek help, (f) set goals, (g) foster meaningful relationships, (h) believe in one's self, and (i) act (which is subdivided into work at a job and work at academics).

To Be Financially Aware

Financial awareness, as a strategy, took two forms: the family (more often the parents) developed strategies for overcoming financial constraints to provide a better life for their children, or the student became aware of the family's financial situation and attempted to improve the family's prospects. In some cases, the students chose to take on employment of their own (as discussed in chapter 5) to alleviate the financial strain on their families. For example, Bertha said, "Financially. My grandma was supporting my dad and my mom. My dad didn't like that and you know he wanted to one day establish his own family and have his own household and everything."

Watching her family struggle and hearing her parent's stories of overcoming odds, Bertha's understanding of success was shaped by financial concerns and insecurity.

In other cases, parents took on multiple jobs in an effort to improve the family's financial position. Lorena's father worked extra hours to enable his wife to stay at home with Lorena's niece, while the baby's mother, Lorena's sister, finished high school. In the whole, financial awareness was an important strategy for negotiating the financial barriers of applying to and attending an institution of higher education. Financial awareness, in the scope of this research, is nearly entirely attributable to the struggle of the student's parents, with a few exceptions of peer comparison.

Bertha's family struggled under the weight of a large family and poor English language skills. They worked long hours during the day in minimum-wage positions, and in the evening both relied on night cleaning jobs to make ends meet. However, work ethic and commitment to maintain a quality of life for their family in the United States exemplifies a strong sense of financial awareness and resulted in the development of individual strategies for overcoming financial barriers in their children. Bertha worked through the beginning of high school to pay for extracurricular activities she knew would play a role in the college admissions process. She listened to her parents' stories of leaving Mexico to make a go at a better life for their young family. She explained their move from Mexico:

> Like my parents, before the rest of the kids were born, when they first were married in Mexico, they tried to just establish life over there, my dad realized it was not going to work, [they] needed to do something [different].

In John Smith's family, his father was constantly treading the line of destitution. He was routinely laid off and rehired as the season dictated in his position as a farm laborer. During these times he turned to family to borrow money or to attempt fast-money schemes running hard-to-find products to Mexico. His children learned pride from their father, a pride that resulted from the dance between prosperity and poverty. They also learned the art of innovation. Awareness of their situation required immediate action. In the case of John's father's accident, the workman's compensation he received was immediately reinvested in a home for his family, building both a sense of security and personal equity. His message to his children, a theme that echoed throughout John's story, was to go further with their education and find secure, indoor employment. He did not want his children to work in the precarious world of menial labor. Michelle's parents echoed the message John's father relayed. The financial awareness of the family's predicament necessitated swift action. Michelle said,

> My parents went through a lot in their life, and they didn't want us to go through the same thing. My dad's first job was picking up animals from the street, but he kept working, and little by little, began making money. Even though my mom didn't have her education, she still got different jobs to be able to support us.

The other form of financial awareness came in the form of the students' appreciation for the cost of higher education and the strategies they developed to enable attendance. The majority of them sought out financial aid and scholarship applications, applying to everything they found. All of them understood the value of high grades and extracurricular activities as possible financial outlets as well,

investing themselves wholly in their education. They developed strategies for cutting costs, turning to online services.

> No, not all 4 years. I got a lot of scholarships last year, smaller ones. This year I only have one scholarship, the Hammonds Foundation, of $12,000, so its $3,000 for every year. So that's pretty cool. And Continental Scholarship is $1,500 a month, not a month, a year. So, I have lots…almost all my tuition. And then I got $1,900 of grant. So, my tuition is covered so far. A little bit for books (loans) but I bought most of my books on eBay so…my parents are helping out with my housing, my apartment. I love my parents.

To Desire Higher Education

The desire to achieve a degree from an institution of higher education was a driving force in the lives of these students. At different points in their stories or during our follow-up discussions, the students mentioned their own pathway to the University. For some, the desire to earn a degree, coupled in some cases with financial awareness, resulted in additional work in the classroom or after school. For others, the desire to attend a university meant prioritizing extracurricular activities and part-time jobs. For most, attending a college or university seemed entirely implausible. Fear of leaving home or leaving behind loved ones, the overwhelming cost and their growing awareness of financial strains already present in the household, and complete ignorance of the admissions process held students back. However, the most important strategy perhaps seen in this research is that, despite individual experience with class and the depth and breadth of at-promise factors, the students each spoke of the value of higher education. They each aspired to "something better"

and saw a college degree as a possible escalator. College meant success, "being" someone.

Rationalizing the cost of education was another strategy. Stephanie's self-titled "fickleness" resulted in the consideration of culinary school. During her junior year of high school when classes were more difficult, Stephanie wondered why anyone would volunteer, at the college level, to pay for education. "I was just like, I can't believe I'm going to possibly have to start paying to do this. So culinary school just seemed fun. And I don't think I'll ever get sick of cooking." Attending culinary school, for that moment, served as possible strategy for achieving formal training beyond high school that did not require Stephanie to pay for a university degree.

To Be Someone or Something Successful

> I guess to succeed, personally I don't think I need a two-story house and have two vehicles and be living it up you know. And have this wonderful furniture. That's not why I'm in college. I could care less. I personally think to me being successful is doing what I love and loving what I do. You know, just to be able to have a decent job that supports me, supports me to have a family, who knows, and to be happy. You know. And love going to work, or you know, love going to help people love being able to support my family. You know what I mean? I mean really, everything I do, it's for my family… and just to help other people. You know what I mean? Why not? If I'm given the chance to, why not do it, you know? I guess that's my interpretation of success.

Attending higher education, graduating with a degree from a nationally recognized institution, meant, for some of these students, the ability to "be someone or do something important" was within reach. Choosing to attend the University meant focusing on grades, working after school or playing an instrument, and focusing on

the horizon. Bertha described her experience in the shadow of a sibling who went before her in the following excerpt from her interview:

> I guess because I saw my brother go through it. I saw him and he did it. You know, if he can do it, why can't I? Hey, your brother graduated college, what are you going to do? So of course, that's why I mean, college for me, there was no other option, you know? This is what I'm going to do. And also, I'm aware that nowadays if you go to college you have a better chance of being successful in life. It's just having the diploma…I knew I wanted to do that and then I just [did it]. I mean, I love learning. I didn't want to just to stop at high school.

In Bertha's case, the motivation to learn coupled with the desire to at the very least keep up with her brother resulted in a strategy to attend higher education.

A different take on college was found in John's comments about why he wanted to attend a 4-year institution:

> Well, I was thinking of this, because right now they're asking for, especially for education, eventually for a job right? Well right now they are asking for a high school diploma. That's one of the requirements. For example you've got to be 16 or 18 to work. And you have your high school diploma to work. That doesn't mean you won't be making $7 or $8 an hour, you may get $12 or $11 an hour. I believe in getting higher education now, 'cause like in 10 years from now, 15 years from now, you won't be asked for a high school diploma. They are going to say you got a college diploma? Master's diploma? Let me see. High school diploma ain't worth nothing. Right now people are mostly, everyone graduates with a high school diploma. Ten years from now, everyone is going to have a high school diploma looking for a job. So like, well, education, you got to look into the future.

For John, the strategy is implied by his perception of workforce requirements. College meant, in his world, a higher paying job and more financial security, both for himself and later for his family.

To Get Out (Of Stereotpye)

The most often-cited strategy for learning about and applying to higher education was the desire to get away from home, get out of a small town, or otherwise start anew. Stephanie articulated her interest in getting away from home through her desire to attend Columbia University in New York. She said,

> I just wanted to go to New York, and I thought going to Columbia would be cool. But in my head, I was like, I'm not really going to go, I didn't think I could be *that* far away from my mom.

Attending a university away from home meant, for Stephanie, leaving behind the deepening silence between her mother and father and the stress of family burdens.

John spoke of convincing his parents that he needed to leave home for college. They both felt strongly, as did Stephanie and Lorena's mothers, that attending school closer to home was a better decision.

> I was just thinking, "Okay, where am I going to go?" I was talking to my dad and I was going to community college. "No," [I thought,] "I want to go away from home." I was a football fan, a [University] fan. I never really thought about going to [the University]. Junior year I was like, "I want to go down to [the University]." I wanted to come to [City] I didn't really know about [the University]. I was really scared about coming to [the University] because of the 50,000, I didn't really think it was for me, and also being a minority I didn't think I would fit in.

To get out of stereotype, to continue the family's legacy, to pick-up where his or her parent's left off, each student spoke of "getting out." Getting out did not mean forgetting from whence they came for these students. Getting out meant leaving home to fulfill a dream, to receive an education, and to eventually return with a new and hopeful future.

To Seek Help

The students in this research sought help when they needed to—a result possibly of the at-promise factors in their lives, the lessons they learned from individuals or institutions that encouraged them to seek assistance. For Stephanie, help came from admitting she was falling into the cracks. This required a distinct self-awareness. No one around her, with the exception of Dylan, knew the extent of Stephanie's fall. Even her academic advisor thought she may recover.

> [Advisor] just thought I was going with the flow. Because she was my academic advisor, she knew I was doing poorly, but she wasn't aware of the full details. In some of my classes she was like, could you bring those up, and I was like I'll try, all the while knowing fully there was no way I could bring them up. I lied to her.

Returning home for the winter break, Stephanie understood the gravity of her situation when she received her first-semester grades. She was going to fail out of college and not one person at the University had noticed. The saving grace on her report card was an incomplete from her economics professor, a foothold in the door of university bureaucracy. She had not failed; her professor did not assign a grade. So, she was free to return to the University on academic probation. Stephanie's story is not unique to at-risk students. What makes her story important is her triumphant return, which she described as follows:

> Um. I thought I was going to get an A, two Bs and a C. I managed an A and three Bs cause my economics professor, um, curved me up a point or two. Um. That was a high point. I was taking tutoring literally every other day, if not everyday. I became really good friends with my tutor. At [university office] you have to find really good tutors. I mean I'm sure they are all trying their best but some of them suck. I met one tutor for math and she was great. And then I found out she was a tutor for Economics. With all her help, I got an A in math. So I was like oh my god. I don't know how I managed that.

> Well, I know how I managed that, I managed with my tutor, and me busting my ass every night doing math. I don't think I ever worked so hard on any class in my whole life. But a 3.2. I couldn't believe it. I didn't. I was really proud.

To Set Goals

The students developed strategies early in school to overcome barriers. John hated to read, but understanding the importance of good grades, which was stressed at a college presentation he attended during his 1st year in high school, he spent extra time working on his language arts classes. John set a goal to complete a lengthy book by the end of summer helped him to overcome his disdain for reading.

Michelle's goals included setting an example for Hispanic women. She talked passionately about her future in business, hoping that her name one day will be a common household name.

> Most people want to be remembered for their own accomplishments or how far they went in life. I don't think that's how I want to be remembered. I'd rather be known by how I helped others further their lives, in a business-like setting. It's not really that I want to be something big in my life, it's more like I want to help others become something big. I do hope my name is remembered. Not like Mother Teresa, not as extreme, but just as a person that helped in the advancement of Hispanics. Right now, my goals are focused upon getting through this first semester. It has been so hectic with all the organizations and meetings and deadlines and exams, but I know I can make it.

Michelle's goals included a focus on business. She chased those goals through her hard work with university organizations and her desire to overcome stereotypes and tear down biases. Despite her busy schedule, she set a goal to survive the current semester. She set her sights on transferring into the business school, a highly

competitive program, to achieve her goals. Motivated by a desire to make a difference, Michelle took the work and commitments in stride. She focused on finding time during her week, between class and band practice and meetings, to complete her homework in anticipation of weekend football games.

Lorena spoke of setting her goals on attending college with plans of eventually going to medical school to become a medical doctor:

> I guess because of my goals. I already had a goal back then and I would talk about [it] with them. They'd be like, "Well, if you want to do that, it'd be better if you went to a high school that we have here that specializes in it." I was like, "Okay, I want to go to a health professions high school." But I didn't get accepted.

In an attempt to reach her goal of attending a university, and later completing medical school, Lorena applied to a high school that offered a health professions focus. Although she was not accepted, Lorena did not let her goal go. Setting a professional goal allowed her to maintain her focus through high school, a skill that proved useful when she began college.

To Foster Meaningful Relationships

The development and nurturing of meaningful relationships, a connection between the metaphorical stars that assisted students in overcoming barriers, is an important resiliency strategy in the lives of young people. A sense of belonging; the encouragement earned at the hands of a positive relationship with an adult, a peer, a team, or a band; and the necessity of feeling important all play a role in the successful negotiation of barriers. In chapter 5, the relationships these students had are

identified. In this section, those relationships are presented as examples of a resiliency strategy to persist in the student's education and in his or her life.

Each of the students had unique experiences with the relationships in his or her lives. For some, such as Stephanie and Amore, the relationships they had, or perhaps did not have, with their fathers proved to be important to their growth as well as to the development of their resilient behaviors. For others, such as Nur and Lorena, relationships were the central focus of their stories and the most important influences on their behavior. For Michelle and Bertha, relationships with their siblings proved to be important goal-setting opportunities.

For Stephanie, her relationship with Dylan was a turning point—both positive and negative—in her college career. Her relationship with Dylan drove her to return home first every weekend, then for 3-day weekends, and later for the better part of the school week. That same relationship would serve as a pillar of strength when no one knew the depth of her despair. Dylan promised her he would not let her fail again, setting an example himself of hard work and dedication in college. "I was so worried that first semester was going to repeat itself. Dylan would tell me not to worry, that he wouldn't let it happen. I don't think I would let that happen again either." Stephanie returned to college, reassured by the knowledge that someone was watching over her and with the realization that if she did not succeed, she would return home a failure in the eyes of her family and friends.

"I think my brother and I were equally neglected. Well we were never…I don't know how else to say it. He never physically hurt us. It was only my mom."

Stephanie's comments about her father are an epithet of her young self. Her father's presence echoed in the background of her story. Her mistrust of strangers, her "quick to flight" edginess, and the sorrow in her eyes speak volumes of her sense of neglect. However, it is in spite of this presence in her life that Stephanie found success and love, friendship, and trust. Her mother's role is of paramount importance.

Although this meaningful relationship was rarely discussed openly, Stephanie spoke of "knowing" how her mother felt. She listened to telephone conversations in which her mother spoke, with pride, of her daughter's successes. She recalled photographs from her childhood in which she is dressed for a Vietnamese pageant. She spoke of her mother's presence in the doorway of her kindergarten classroom with a fondness and a softness she reserved only for comments about her mother. This relationship was both positive and negative for Stephanie. Because of her father's illness, her mother was forced to provide for the entire family, a burden Stephanie tried to alleviate by finding a job in high school. Stephanie's mother fulfilled both parental roles; she provided a strong sense of stability and high expectations for her daughter.

The negative component of meaningful relationships in the eyes of these students is best expressed by Amore's relationship with her father and her softball coach.

> I guess that's another thing. I know that I will never, I hope that, I hope that I never am weak. That's another one of my things. I don't ever want to be weak. If I'm going to do something physically or academically I can't have a weakness. And um, a flaw or anything like that cause then he'll be able to like point it out. Or to take it out. Like with my coach, I can't have a flaw in softball because he'll be able to just nag on me about it nag on me about it.

Despite the belief that nothing she did would impress him, Amore worked desperately to gain his approval, or perhaps to actively prove him wrong. She was prom queen, valedictorian, and sought and received admission to an elite institution of higher education. He, by contrast, did not attend higher education. She was a success by any measure. And she may be the first to credit her father's negativity with this honor. In the absence of a positive father figure, Amore had a mother who set an example of hard work and persistence and a stepfather who understood and acknowledged her gains.

Lorena and Nur were reared with their share of adversity, but it was perhaps the positive relationships in their lives that most fostered their resilient behavior. Lorena attended a precollege program for promising students in New York, but it was her family that drew her back, away from the glamour of the Ivy League.

> When I went to New York I was too far away. I spent my first birthday away from my family there, because it was during the summer. My niece was growing up. She was a baby. So I missed some of that too. I was like, "No, I can't deal without my family."

Lorena's mother played a large role in Lorena's decision to attend a university closer to home.

> I guess [Mom] knew, if Lorena is going to want to do something, she's going to do it. So she's like, "Okay, you're going to go off to school, I'm okay with it. After I left she was like, "Are you sure you don't want to come back home?" I was like, "No, mommy. Why do you want me to come back, I'm getting a good education, I'm doing well? You're not paying for anything, I'm not asking for money, I'm just being over there." And then, finally, she's like, "I get it." I guess she didn't approve of me being over here. And I told her that. And she's like, "I understand, I understand. I know that you feel stronger being over there. I guess I felt the same way when I left Mexico, that's why I didn't go back, you know? There was nothing to go back to. I understand."

Like Lorena's mother, Nur relied heavily on her relationship with her maternal grandmother. Lorena's sister played an equally prominent role in her work ethic and in her example of success. At a young age, Lorena's sister, a strong student, left high school to give birth to her first child. Following her marriage to the baby's father and the birth of a healthy boy, Lorena's sister returned to high school to complete her degree and graduated fifth in her class. She is now working towards her college diploma. Lorena mentioned this story as a reason for her own success. Watching her sister struggle and succeed, she knew that success was also within her own reach.

Families play an important and significant role in the lives of all 7 students. However, in some examples, the memory of an individual raises the bar for these students. In early 2000, Nur said goodbye to the only woman she had known as a mother, her maternal grandmother. Less than a year later, Nur's grandmother passed away. "After her passing, I made a promise to myself to never let my grandmother down." Nur spent her early days in the United States repeating the words that would later be her mantra for success: "To not to waste time, to do my best in everything that I do, to take advantage of everything. And not do things that I think would disappoint her." Despite the distance between grandmother and granddaughter when Nur first arrived in the United States and later the death of her grandmother, Nur stood fast by her promise.

Her relationship and her respect for her grandmother strengthened her resolve to become more gregarious (she chose seats next to the more outgoing students and willingly "put herself out there"), to succeed in her schooling (she graduated

valedictorian), and to attend an American university (she is a 2nd-year business student). The importance of her promise, the result of a very meaningful relationship, manifested as a series of resilient strategies for beating her own odds. "[My grandmother] is a major factor that I attribute to my success."

Michelle, Bertha, and John exemplify the most positive relationships with their families. In John's story, his father played a central role in setting an example for success. In Bertha's story, it is both her parents' examples as well as those of her older brothers. In Michelle's story, it is the experience of her siblings and their successful navigation of the odds stacked against them to achieve advanced degrees in medicine and nursing. The examples of meaningful relationships with a family member are endless. Bertha spoke of her parents' example of scraping together a life without formal education as motivation for her own success, "It's like well why not, you know? Why? I have to go to school, you know? What else am I going to do? You know?"

Although the role of family played a prominent role in the lives of these students, it may be the result of proximity. Who better knows how to navigate particular barriers than one's own family? The key to this strategy is the need to nurture meaningful relationships. The students understood their families' role, they strove to prove themselves worthy of respect, and they built on relationships with teachers and peers to find their way to a place that would make their families proud.

To Believe in One's Self

The most telling strategy, and perhaps the most clandestine, is the student's belief in themselves, the belief that there is something better out there, and their dedication to finding it. John and Michelle wrote about standing up for what they believed in, a strategy that found John the recipient of a refund and Michelle as a tutor for English. These resiliency strategies may stem from a desire not to disappoint those influential people in their lives as well as a general fear of failure. Despite the barriers discussed in chapter 5, these students harnessed an inner power to achieve admission to a competitive university far from their homes, their families, and the world that they once knew. They beat lack of academic preparation, precollege messaging from family and teachers that implied they were not worthy, lack of funding, and the seemingly insurmountable task of applying. They are attending the university of their dreams on the wings of a prayer.

They found the proverbial silver lining and then set their course by it. They overcame disappointment and tragedy, abuse and neglect, and found themselves stronger for it. In the following excerpt John shared his impression of higher education, and in particular, the rationale for working towards a college degree. To not attend a university after the hard work of high school, to John, would mean failure.

> I put all these hours in these AP classes and stuff like that, why not continue into it, you know? I spent my summer reading extra credit books for AP classes why not continue on to college, you know? That's what I meant when I said I believe in higher education. You have to look into the future. If you see a good job, don't just take it, maybe 5 years from now the company is going to go broke and what are you going to do with a high school diploma? My

> brother, he's going to community college, so that's pretty good, but I know a lot of kids from where I went to school, when they graduated they were working, like three or four of them. What are they going to do when the company lays them off? All they got is a high school diploma. Ten years from now everyone's going to have a high school diploma. When they are 35 the new kids will be 20 years old, young and strong, as opposed to a 35-year-old man, old and worn out.

Lorena's disappointment came in the shape of not receiving admission to the nursing program. She entered the university to become a nurse but missed the academic cut-off to be admitted to the highly selective program. Rather than losing sight of her goals or leaving the university, Lorena rationalized the disappointment in the following quote:

> Not getting into nursing school was the big thing for me. It was very hard for me to get through it. Then coming into this new major I'm just like, "Wow, I like it. It's like really fun and it's like I'm not stressed at all anymore." I used to go into class thinking I need to make a certain grade to have a certain GPA to get into a certain school. And that was my thought from Day 1. Work hard. And then it was just really hard. It was really, really hard. And now I don't feel that way. I want to do extremely well, but I don't have that hanging over me if I don't do good. Yea, I can't get into the nursing school. I guess this year, me and my roommate we talk more about things we learn and different things that go on in class and before it wasn't like that. It was more like you're taking your basics, the reading, the English, now it's more dealing with the social issues and, I don't know, phenomena I guess. We talk about things now. I have always, I felt like our majors are kind of the same. …We should open a nonprofit together, you know, once we graduate.

The realization that perhaps, despite the setback, there was a positive outcome to her failure to receive admission to the nursing program, Lorena exemplifies resiliency. She does not grow discouraged or despondent, she finds the opportunity and she runs with it.

Fear of disappointing her grandmother was a source of motivation for Nur, and as such, an important resiliency strategy. Similar themes of not wishing to

disappoint a family member echo in the stories of Amore, Stephanie, and Lorena. When asked directly of her fear of disappointing her mother, Stephanie's reaction was immediate and emotional. She lowered her head and mumbled something about doing better later, a possible rationale for not sharing with her mother the story of her first semester failure. From that enormous burden of possible disappointment Stephanie literally turned her grades around, as mentioned above, earning a 3.2 GPA her second semester. At the root of her success, it may be argued, as the case with Nur's promise to never disappoint her grandmother, is her need to make her mother proud. Said Stephanie,

> I think, um, upsetting my mom would be the worst thing I could ever do especially since she's always supported me. 'Cause I don't want to be another person that she has to support. She already supports my dad, and my brother, and herself. And I don't. I don't want her to spend any more money on me.

In Bertha's story, the experience of disappointment was internal. She knew she was going to college to learn. Her motivation, both in proving herself a worthy competitor to her brother (a recent college graduate) and in providing her family with financial security, was unflagging. However, after declaring her major and registering for a particularly difficult course, Bertha's true strength, her refusal to disappoint herself, shone through in the following excerpt from our discussion:

> I'm right now considered a full-time student. I was taking 12 hours and I was struggling in my bio class. I had talked to the professor and he was like, "You can pass, you're going to get a C." I was just like, "I don't want to get a C. I don't want to get an A or a B just because I want it to affect my GPA." I didn't do everything I could to begin with. I need to learn this knowledge or this material a bit better. And I told him I'm going to retake the class because I know I can do so much more. And I want to get the knowledge out of this class. So I'm taking the class again in the spring. I guess you could say, I failed in the sense that well, okay, I didn't complete the class. But at the same

> time I'm retaking the class in the spring. You know? I'm definitely going to work harder next semester and I'm going to retake this class. Because I'm determined to get what I want out of the course. I've just got to try again and that's what I'm going to do next semester.

At she shared this example, Bertha defined the word *failure* in her own life as the ability to pick oneself up and take away a lesson learned. To fail, she suggested, is okay, as long as you are willing to get up, learn, and try again.

To Act

Apart from the examples above are individual strategies, cited within specific examples, which warrant further discussion. These strategies are born from the need to act, to recognize the barrier and to do whatever it may take to overcome it. Unlike the strategies mentioned above, to act is the physical action of wanting, doing, and taking. Aware of the financial restrictions placed upon them, their academic shortcomings, and the activity required of them to receive admission to an elite university, these students accepted the challenge to act. The strategy is broken into two sections, Work and Push Academic Limits.

Work. "I've been working ever since [high school] just looking for tuition, where I can get more money," said John, in response to a question about why he chose to work during high school. In this research the value of work is mentioned over and over. On this final point, work is seen as the action strategy, born from various acknowledgements of financial instability, the students enumerated upon the need to find money or to make high marks in their classes to ensure scholarship offers. Unique to their definition of the role of income in their lives, the students

undertook to close the financial gap between themselves and college attendance through the security of a job. They watched their parents and their siblings work hard to secure the family, and they learned to do the same. In the following passage, Bertha summed up the strategy of work:

> I really didn't see any point in complaining. I never saw my parents complain so why would I complain? I mean, the thing about my parents is they didn't sit there and tell us don't do this, don't do that. Their actions just spoke. Whatever they did I saw and I learned from it. And so that's why, you know, in college or in high school, you know, working and going to school…I just did it. It wasn't like, oh, well I don't know if I should work because of, I won't be able to ah, be in this organization, I just did it. And somehow I managed to be in the organization. You know. I managed to pull myself here and there and still be able to get through you know everyday and help out my family and try to make sure my grades are still up there. Of course there was a point where I was just like, "I'm not working anymore. I can only do so much." Then yea, I stopped working. But sill, I was really involved in high school. You know, I was student government, things like that.

John worked during his summers under the hot summer sun at a horse barn. He saved enough money to bridge the gap left by insufficient financial aid. John also accepted a 10-hour-a-week position during his 1st year at school. Lorena, too, accepted a position at the University, though she works approximately 15 hours a week at the payroll office. Work was a strategy for these students to engage actively in their hopes of attending higher education.

Push academic limits. Each of the students mentioned the importance of doing "well" academically. This meant working diligently on their schoolwork; spending time with teachers after school; recognizing the competitive spirit of college admissions; and engaging, despite the hardship, in extracurricular activities to boost their attractiveness to admissions offices. They accepted counsel from their peers,

their teachers, or their siblings, and in some cases their parents. Occasionally the students found themselves in the role of teacher, advising their parents on the value of higher education. To be smart was not enough, these students reasoned; they had to graduate at the top of their class, and they had to succeed on standardized exams. Sometimes the students focused on their academics to the disdain of their peers, but they persevered, their eyes on the college "prize."

John's story ends with a glimpse at this strategy working. He told a story of a discussion between a father and his son, an argument over the value of education. John's father encouraged his children to work hard during primary and secondary school. He believed that a high school diploma was sufficient to achieve a promising career. He did not understand, nor did he value, postsecondary education. Yet, he did understand the value of high school diploma as a requirement for an inside job.

> My parents didn't go to high school. They told us, "Get education, don't be out in the sun, get an inside office job. Don't be out there working your back off." So that's how they pushed me on. And that meeting actually played a big role. I got to do this.

John likened his journey to higher education to his father's journey to the United States. John's father entered the United States when he was 16 years old, he did not speak the language, and he knew no one here. John, at 19, is already 3 years ahead of his father in his journey to make a better life for himself. Said John, "I know people here. I have a cell phone. He didn't have anything. Why can't I do it? Why can't I get off to college?" That attitude, the belief that if his father could make a life for himself then so too could John, is what enabled him to attend the University. He will be a

success because he sees his own college experience as the extension of the journey his father began 20 years earlier.

Lorena also followed the example of a family member. Her sister left school as a junior to give birth to her child but returned to school shortly after giving birth to graduate fifth in her class. Lorena's mother would not give her consent to her daughter to marry her boyfriend, the baby's father, if Lorena's sister did not promise to return to high school. Lorena followed in the footsteps of her sister, attending the same high school academy and making her academic mark on the school. After a disappointing semester in an advanced math class, Lorena's teacher would not allow her to take the placement exam, for fear she would fail. Rather than accept a lower placement, Lorena found a summer school course across town that would prepare her for the exam. Registering for the course meant Lorena was forced to take several buses to and from the class, but at the end of the summer she took the exam and scored in the high 90s, securing her position in the advanced course for the following year. Lorena's hard work and self-advocacy skills resulted in the honor of delivering the valedictorian speech at her high school graduation. She said of that occasion, "Being valedictorian, that's a big accomplishment. And I was like wow, my sister graduated fifth in her class, I graduated number one. I was like, that's big."

The students understood the need to act, to focus on their dreams and to attend an elite university. They worked hard, developed strong study skills, learned second languages, and developed meaningful relationships into learning opportunities. They took on jobs, they spent their summers and evenings working on schoolwork, and

they rationalized this to parents who did not have education beyond their primary years. These students acted.

Summary

This chapter presented the unique at-promise factors and resulting resiliency strategies that served as navigation tools over the rough terrain of these students' culture of class. Subjectively, the lessons learned by these students through their interactions with people, places, events, and environmental limitations forced these students creatively to develop, perhaps unknowingly, pathways that led to college and subsequently to success. In the next chapter, the research is summarized and four key recommendations about further research and practice related to overcoming obstacles in education are presented.

CHAPTER 7

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

"Let's put all our children in the same boat, then work together to raise the level of the river" (Maran, 2000, p. 292). The vision of this project was to raise the level of understanding held by policymakers and educational practitioners for the student-level experience with deficit or at-risk assumptions. Ensuring all children will have a seat on the boat or a place in the elevator metaphor, educational researchers must recognize first the barriers faced by children and second the adaptive behaviors or resiliency strategies of those students who overcame those barriers. This chapter provides a summary of the findings as well as conclusions and directives for future research. The value of a qualitative study designed to understand the depth of individualized experiences with class, the aptly titled *culture of class*, and the resulting resilient behaviors of these individual students represent a value-added approach to educational research.

Rather than focus on labeling these students at risk and lowering expectations for their future prospects, this research identifies the at-promise factors (individuals, institutions, or experiences) in their lives that aided them in their journey to higher education. Lauding their success instead of identifying their shortcomings, this research identifies key factors and behaviors that in fact represent a wealth of

resources. Tapping into those resources is the next step to building a sturdy pathway through the pipeline for all students to follow.

My Vision

Undertaking a project to explore the influence of social class on a student's perceived access to and opportunity for higher education for the express purpose of understanding his or her journey seemed an entirely undoable project—initially. My enthusiasm was met with cautionary advice and quizzical glances. One reviewer suggested my research was simply boring. However, in completing this process three things became clear:

1. This is important research; the individual journeys of students labeled at risk when they are clearly at promise suggest hope for future generations to beat the odds.

2. This research does not redefine class, but rather recognizes the depth and the breadth of experience as a better definition than the current use of categories; class is fluid and expansive.

3. Individuals react to and interact with to their environment in the same way that nature reacts to individuals, adapting and expanding, developing coping and survival strategies as needed.

These three items— (a) at-promise, (b) a breadth and depth to class, and (c) environmental adaptation—are together the definition of resiliency. The question to address is how to understand and recognize resiliency in the world of educational

access and opportunity. Perhaps more importantly, once resilient behaviors are identified, how does that information serve the population? In line with the vision of initially understanding the student experience, I have maintained this research is not mean to be generalized to the entire population. This research is meant to be read by students who, because of their environment, are at risk for reaching their potential. The 7 students' constellations presented in this research are representative only of the power of one: one story, one voice, one experience. The vision is that a student recognizes himself or herself in one or more of the constellations and in doing so identifies some key at-promise behaviors or resiliency strategies to use in his or her own life.

Summary of Findings

The following section of this chapter summarizes the findings of this research, in particular focusing on the final component of a constellation, the image. This research project grew from a conversation about injustice and a sense of impatience over how best to engage injustice.

The Researcher

The positioning of the researcher to this research is of equal importance to the choice of a research methodology, epistemology, and model. Autoethnographic methods were used as a first step in the process of creating a constellation, an invitation for the researcher to cross the lines of data collection into the lived

experience of another (S. H. Jones, 2005). The life story christened the student as researcher. The follow-up discussion blurred the lines a bit further; the roles of participant as researcher and researcher as participant were opaque. The meaning-making process, recognized early in the methodology of this research as constructionist, thus render the findings of this research "interpretive renderings" (Charmaz, 2005, p. 510) of *a* reality, not *all* realities.

The final stage of this research, the construction of a metaphoric constellation, combines the efforts of researcher and participant, an iterative act of writing, reading, seeing, and listening. Charmaz (2005) further argued that as researchers, we inherently share in the construction of knowledge. Engaged in the back-and-forth of understanding and reflexive collaboration (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005), researcher and participant together generate a complete story.

Each week the students received an e-mail from the researcher. The e-mailed notes gave the researcher an opportunity to check in with the students once a week to see if they had questions or concerns, or wished to talk about their writing. What began as an exercise in good research practices transitioned into a resource of collaboration as well as an opportunity for intervention in the life of the student as well as the life of the researcher. These conversations are an important component of this research, a site for reinforcement, encouragement, verification, and legitimation. What follows are excerpts from e-mail messages sent by the students to the researcher, and then the researcher's follow-up with the student. These side

conversations are a valuable source of information and evidence of true collaboration and reflexive dialogue. No longer a researcher, I talked to these individuals as friends.

Following an e-mail about selecting captions for the photographs they chose, Amore sent an e-mail (removed from this discussion to prevent identification of her photos) that offered touching sentiments justifying her choices. I replied to her, "You are a poet :) Perfect." In turn, she sent the following message: "Thank you, I can't wait until it's done, it's going to be awesome, the whole book that is." In the same e-mail discussion Nur replied to me, "Please let me know if you need anything else, Jess! I'm looking forward to [the date of my dissertation defense]."

Stephanie and I discovered that we both keep late hours, especially during the final writing of this dissertation. As such, we volleyed e-mails back and forth during the early hours of the morning, discussed her bid to be a reporter for the university's student newspaper, her academics, her relationships (see chapter 4, Stephanie's story, for a complete transcript of her renewed relationship with Daniel), and her life. In return, I sent short e-mails back, proud of her, laughing with her, encouraging her, and perhaps more than anything, listening to her. In return, she listened to me gripe about dissertations, job searches, and editing.

Many of the students were thankful to me, a concept that still makes me smile, for their participation in the study. I baked cookies during fall final exams; I received Christmas cards and notes of well wishes in return. I reminded them to take care of their minds and their bodies during the stress of midterm exams and the start of the

spring semester. I wrote a Thanksgiving e-mail, excerpted below, to remind them that I believe it is *I* who should be thanking them.

> Hello to each of you,
>
> With the Thanksgiving break rapidly approaching I thought I may take this moment to be both thankful and (in the same email) remind you all the importance of your story. First, the thankful piece. For you, college is about constant motion - whether it be from class to class, class to activities like band (!), organization to organization, job to job, from friend to friend. Whatever your daily schedule may include, I am sure it is already quite full. And then, we met. I asked you to do the nearly unthinkable. To squeeze a few moments, here and there, from an already overscheduled life. And I know each of you has already found those moments - whether it be to reply to my emails, to finish your stories, to stop and chat in the hallways of Jester, or to send me your photographs. Not to mention the countless lunches, snacks, and late dinners you each have spent sitting across from me, my digital recorder, and my endless list of questions. So, thank you for finding those moments. Both because your stories will be for me the culmination of six years of work and also for the audience that will one day read your stories and recognize in your journey similar 'bumps' along the road (to borrow form one of your peers…)

In reply I received e-mails from students about their vacation plans, their "stories," and a string of e-mails in response to my own that returned the thanks: "Have a safe and scrumptious Holiday!" One wrote, "Thank you very much. I'll read everything over the break. Thanks for everything." One participant responded simply, "I'm working on it :):):)" Another replied, "I loved everything, thank you very much. I loved it." Others are quoted below:

> Hi Jess!
> I just got back! Thanksgiving was great! I hope you enjoyed your week long break as well =) Thank you sooooo much for writing about me! You were right... you made me look really impressive on paper! hehe.. I just made a few minor adjustments. Feel free to email me/call me if you need any additional info!
>
> I've edited my chapter (section now) and attached it to this e-mail; all the changes are in red. By the way, thanks SO much for the cookies! They were

> awesome, and definitely a nice break from all that studying during finals week. Well I hope your break is going great, and take care!
> PS: I told most of my family and friends about your dissertation and they're thrilled.
>
> I got another 3.2 for the semester, so now I have a 2.25. I'm able to declare a major now, I think, or at least apply to Communications. I'm only taking 4 classes because I'm hoping to find a job.
> OH! I'm getting a new tattoo this week. :)
> OH! and pictures. I have two left. I don't know what to do. I'll figure it out. Anyway. I'll see you soon.
>
> I'm thinking that instead of a tattoo, I'll get a legal name change. I currently have my father's middle and last name, and since probably 9th grade, I've wanted to change it to my mom's middle and last name. It'll cost about the same as a new tattoo... I think I'll also officially make a will, that price I'm not quite sure about. That too is something I've always wanted to do.

The students' e-mails speak to the relationship of the researcher to the research. I am interconnected with the process, as well as their growing sense of accomplishment. When they read their stories to approve the content, many wrote back in surprise that they "sounded" so impressive on paper. My typical e-mail reply was, "You are amazing," a gesture to the awe I felt being invited to their "lived, felt experience" (S. H. Jones, 2005, p. 765). So, engaged in their lives, I cross, at times, the line from understanding to action. The components of the research model are summarized below.

The Research Model

The constellation model was designed to serve as a multidimensional model of understanding. Constellations in the evening sky, such as Orion, are comprised of hundreds of stars that come together to form a somewhat coherent image. Over that

scaffolding of stars, astronomers overlay an image, for example, the fearless hunter Orion. To that image a creation myth is assigned. In the case of this research, the constellation model provides the framework to display the depth and the breadth of individual student experience within his or her culture of class within the broad "night sky" of other students. This model is flexible and transferable.

The Stories

This research begins and ends with a story. The students provided their "creation myth" in response to a prompt to explain how they arrived at higher education. Some wrote two-page documents and others wrote 16 pages. At the time of this writing, 2 students are still writing their stories to be included in this analysis. The stories are the essential starting place of this research. True to the inductive and exploratory nature of this analysis, the students wrote their stories and then spent time with the researcher in a discursive discussion, fine-tuning their stories and adding additional, previously forgotten, information. The researcher then becomes complicit in the act of meaning making, a valuable experience and indispensable exercise in collaboration. The stories give life to the constellation, they are the souls of each student, and they are the opportunity for readers to recognize "a little bit of themselves" or, said one student, to feel as though they are reading their own story in print.

The Stars

This analysis setout to address two research questions. The first question looked to identify the key barriers to higher education that, interacting with each other, also create a lived experience of class. The analysis, presented in chapter 5, provided examples of the five constitutive elements as well as a possible sixth element based on the student's environment. The "stars" that comprise the outer scaffolding of a student's individual constellation are the individuals, institutions, and events in a student's life that directly or indirectly enabled the student to overcome barriers.

The Photographs

Constellation image. In the following section, the students' photographs, with assigned captions to express individual meaning, are displayed. These photographs are meant only to complete the process of "seeing" a student's constellation. Keeping in line with the vision of this research, the photographs are not included in the analysis portion of this research. Students selected the photographic image to assign to their constellations, and as such the choice rises above any level of analysis. They source of the photographs is not included to protect the individual identities of the student participants. When necessary, faces or other identifying images in the photos are smudged to prevent identification. These photographs are the capstone of this project and the final step in completing the model. *What my life has meant.* In the

following section, the students' photographs represent their reply to the prompt,

"What my life has meant to me."

Figure 1. This is a picture of a few of my cousins in [Country Name], and it has been about 6 years since we've seen each other. During the holidays, my uncles would invite me to their homes and allowed me to play with my cousins. I remember playing with every single one of my 30+ cousins, and I'm anxious to be with them again someday.

Figure 2. These are probably some of my closest friends in high school. I spent countless hours with them working as an officer in student council throughout my high school career. All of our expenses to go to Six Flags after the State Convention in [Name of City] were paid by either our sponsor, [Teacher's Name], or our district. Additionally, my friends and I spent more time together when we attended leadership workshops, or summer workshops. The long bus ride to camps will always be memorable.

Figure 3. This picture was taken a few days after my grandparents met my mom for the first time. I was still in [Country Name]. Even though my step family and I come from different religions and race, they always make me feel included. They remember all the important events in my life, and they display their love for me through gifts. I am so lucky and blessed to have grandparents like them.

Figure 4. My life quest has been to please you, and I have realized that I can't or won't, not now or ever, but know that I still love you

Figure 5. More than a sister, a best friend sent from God that will always be my blood

Figure 6. Then one day the ugly ducking emerged from behind the green grass and into the yellow sunlight as a swan, an unforgettable moment

Figure 7. A woman who is remarkable, she is my idol, provider, friend, teacher, but above all my mom.

Figure 8. My brown eyes hidden, by the width of my smile.

Figure 9. The buttons on my laptop couldn't endure the many hours a day of typing.

Figure 10. Cupcakes and I Heart Huckabees are popular themes in our relationship.

Figure 11. My CDs are being kept safe with Dylan, due to my fear of them being stolen while living in a dorm.

Figure 12. Personalizing my room really made dorm-life a lot more comfortable.

Figure 13. Many many hours have been spent in a car, sometimes without air-conditioning.

Figure 14. Having to mature at an early age.

Figure 15. Being able to admire the beauty of art.

Figure 16. Family.

Figure 17. Maturing with old friends.

Figure 18. Making new friends.

Figure 19. Staying committed.

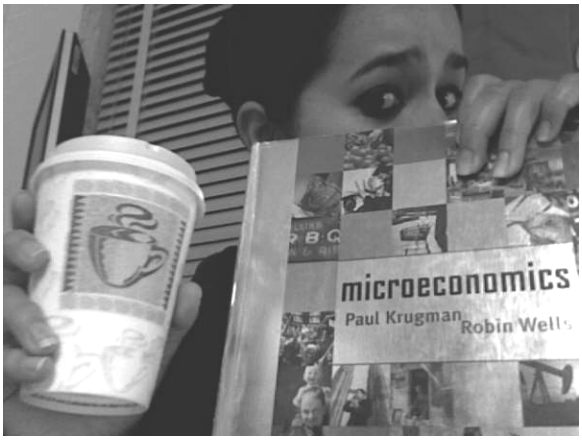

Figure 20. Facing challenges.

Figure 21. Being a part of something amazing.

Figure 22. Capturing the moment.

Figure 23. Making connections that last forever.

Figure 24. Enjoying music.

Figure 25. Taking out the beauty in the smallest things.

Figure 26. Love.

Figure 27. Having the support of many.

Figure 28. Taking risks.

Figure 29. Performing.

Figure 30. Success.

Figure 31. Plain and simply, having fun.

Figure 32. Never forgetting those closest to me—pets, family, and friends.

Figure 33. It's ALL been a roller coaster.

Figure 34. I choose this pic because this is our old home in Mexico where my family lived years ago. Its heard to really see but this house or should I say room was all my parents could claim as their's. Now the house us locked up with hopes of one day it getting remodeled by my parents when they retire.

Figure 35. Is of my dad and niece, of which is so adores. I chose this one b/c I see the close relationship his is forming with this little one. I definitely see the relationship that I had with my dad growing up and how I was always dad's little girl:)

Figure 36. My mom and my nieces. These little ones are the life of my parents. The whole family grew even closer when these 2 little ones came along.

Figure 37. My niece and I. I am her Godmother and up to this point I have tried to incorporate God into her life but of course up to where she can understand. I plan on always being there for this child and trying to instill great values into her, just like what my parents did to me. The reason I state this is because at the moment her parents (my brother and his wife) are going through marriage problems.

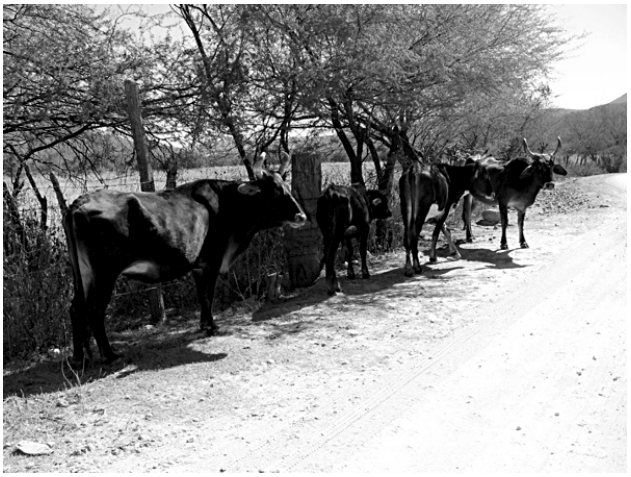

Figure 38. This pic I took outside of my grandma's house in Mexico. Its not very often here in the city that one can just walk outside and have animals blocking your doorway. Its definitely a culture thing:)

Figure 39. My brothers of course. These are the 3 hardworking men of our fam. of course my dad is missing. I was hoping to be able to get you a family pic. of all of us but I could not find any recent ones of all of us together. Its usually some of us here and there:):)

Figure 40. Mural facing my high school parking lot. It expresses that dreams can be achieved by education.

Figure 41. No Caption; Speaks for itself.

Figure 42. This is the glass case in the hallway of my high school that contains pictures of alumni who are considered successful. I hope to one day have my picture displayed in that glass case.

Figure 43. Mural facing track of my high school. Symbolizes diversity in culture, religion, future but that education is the means for our destination in life.

Figure 44. Anything in life is possible as long as we have the will to prosper.

Figure 45. Everything seems to be finally paying off--over time put a little bit and a little bit into something and eventually you have a big pond

Figure 46. Why…If I did it he can too.

Figure 47. Life was always full of twists and turns.

Figure 48. Throughout my life I mostly saw a one-way, dirt road, between home and school.

Figure 49. Where my parents began, but never finished, their education.

Figure 50. My first experience of school was in Mexico and short lived.

Figure 51. My faith has been with me all along the way.

Figure 52. The steps I walked everyday I went to school where I made someone out of myself.

Figure 53. You may call this a shack, but I call it Mi Casa.

Figure 54. I was always trying to get across this barrier which seemed impossible to do but the outcome of a hardworking young man is that now he is on the other side of this barrier.

Conclusions

This research was an inductive and exploratory analysis that addressed two key areas of educational access and opportunity.

Research Question 1: How do the individual elements of class (income, wealth, social relationships, race, and education) interact to create a culture of class? How do these elements act as barriers in the lives of students?

Research Question 2: How do individual stories, despite established class barriers, provide insight into the unique strategies for overcoming barriers to equal access and opportunity in education?

Rather than focus on an interview model, beginning with "So, how *did* you beat the odds?" this research took an inductive track, building trust with student participants, asking for their experience, and providing a forum for open discussion. The phenomena in question are how students overcome class-based barriers to higher education (beating the odds) and what their experience looks like (the culture of class) as a three-dimensional model (the constellation model). The innovation behind such work is the lack of student voice in the extant literature. The motivation was the stories themselves.

The Culture of Class

The first research question in this analysis asked the question of what the barriers are to higher education, and how those barriers interact to generate a culture of class. A key conclusion of this research is the recognition of class as an experience, not a category as previously constructed in research. Despite the labels assigned to members of the community based on financial success or failure, social connections and access to resources, or even the neighborhood in which one lives, human

existence is uniquely individual. Some students beat the odds, while others fall behind and eventually fade away. In chapter 5, the five barriers—(a) income, (b) wealth, (c) social relationships, (d) race, and (e) education—that compose the culture of class as well as the student's descriptions of the "stars" that played a significant role in the student's ability to overcome the barrier are explored in depth.

The answer to the question of why some survive when others fail is based primarily on ecological or environmental models. The individual reacts to an environmental stimulus, based on his or her cadre of resources collected over the years, and either adapts, assimilates, or dies. The conceptual model, the culture of class, was acknowledged as an aggregate of the previously mentioned barriers. However, a small proportion of the students mentioned their "environment," as a potential barrier as well as a contributor to their successes. Environmental obstacles were listed briefly, not as a sixth barrier, but in recognition of the individual's reaction to a stimulus in his or her environment that brings about a change in behavior. The environmental barriers are a combination of one or more of the five key constitutive elements in the culture-of-class model.

Developing Resiliency

The second overarching research question in this research presented the problem of how some students beat the odds whereas others fail to thrive. What are the resiliency strategies developed by these successful students? Chapter 6 explores, in depth, the two-part process to successful resiliency strategies. In the first half of

chapter 6, at-promise factors are identified. The factors are individual characteristics, traits, or attributions that are present in successful students. Three thematic strands of at-promise factors, listed in order of importance, were identified: (a) self-actualization, which includes pride, motivation, and confidence; (b) emotional maturity, which includes self-awareness and maturity; and (c) faith, which includes a belief system, a "little luck," and provincial intervention. These three themes, developed during the cross-case analysis of the students' stories and discussion transcripts, represent the skills and behaviors the students learned or modeled after the stars in each of their lives.

The second section of chapter 6 focused on the strategies students developed to be resilient. Nine strategies were identified during cross-case analysis: (b) to be financially aware; (b) to desire higher education; (c) to be someone or something successful; (c) to get out (of stereotypes); (d) to seek help; (e) to set goals; (f) to foster meaningful relationships; (g) to believe in one's self; and (h) to act, which was subdivided into actions that related to work and actions that related to school. Each represents a tactic, identified by the research, for overcoming barriers to higher education.

The key to action is the reaction to environmental stimulus. This research first exposes the environment by identifying the barriers. Then, the individuals, institutions, or events that exist in a student's life, perhaps without their immediate knowledge, are identified that may help alleviate the burden to barriers. Finally, the strategies developed by the students to overcome the barriers, either on their own or

in concert with other individuals in their life, are described. As stated before, this research is about recognizing one's self in the pages of someone else's experience, not generalizing these results to an entire population.

Recommendations

These students have exposed the vulnerable and powerful at-promise factors that guided their journey to higher education. Based on the preliminary findings of this inductive analysis, four themes are presented below as recommendations for practice and research, as well as the implications for future researchers to continue this line of analysis. The participants articulated, with eloquence, their own pathways and communities, where they stopped for encouragement, where incentives made even the most insurmountable barrier seem traversable, and when recognition by others made the journey seem worthwhile.

The unique strategies in the lives of these students represent transferable, recognizable options for adults and students alike. From the lives of these students emanates the power of recognition in the lives of entire population of students assumed to be at risk, criminal, stupid, unable, unwilling, or without merit. If not for a person, an institution, or an experience, some or all of these students might not be enrolled at the University. The final recommendation is a broad edict to practitioners and policymakers alike. A sense of belonging, of being "good enough," of empowering student success and instilling a sense that no barrier is insurmountable, is the most important job of anyone who is employed in the field of education. To

belong is to feel as though you are never alone with your struggle. Teachers, administrators, and policymakers must "see," "hear," and "do" based on this promise to nurture a sense of belonging.

Incentivize

The use of incentives in research stretches from child-rearing practices to animal training, weight loss to job performance. The simple act of rewarding good behavior raises the self-esteem and the sense of accomplishment in a person's life. Incentives, in the K–12 realm, may be 5 extra minutes of recess time or the honor of sitting in a special seat in the classroom. In the case of John Smith, incentives came in the shape of money or an edible treat as a reward for good grades.

> No, fourth grade was ice cream. One, two, three times, every time we memorized one of the times tables we got a picture of a boat or a banana but in the end we did go to get ice cream. After all of this we got a cherry, which was the nines, the top of the times tables. That's when I get really involved in math.

John's desire to do well in math began with the promise of an ice cream, but from an academic perspective, the incentive awakened in John the desire to learn.

Thus, the recommendation from this research is that teachers should be recognized for their efforts to create a successful learning environments based on a reward, rather than a deficit, system. Providing students practical incentives for their undivided attention, funding field trips to museums or cultural opportunities, expands the teaching moment and sets the tenor for student behavior and focus in the classroom.

Encourage

Encouragement is the key to debunking at-risk assumptions. Despite the incentives provided or the possibility of recognition, these students spoke most frequently of the role of support, often in the forms of encouragement, from their environment. In the case of Amore, the negative encouragement and dismissive parenting she received from her father still worked to encourage her behavior. She took his challenges and turned them into successes. He told her she would be nothing, and she became valedictorian; he told her she would never get into the University, and she worked harder. John Smith wrote, at the end of his story, about his parents' lack of encouragement regarding his decision to attend the University. Despite their opinion, he used their discouraging words as fuel for his success when he did arrive on campus. Together, encouragement, incentives, and recognition are the final level of support in the lives of these students.

Thus, encouraging words and gestures are a key recommendation of this analysis. Practitioners and researchers alike must focus on encouraging students to speak up, to feel secure in asking questions, to engage, as entrepreneurs, in their learning. Rather than speaking among themselves on which policies will work with the population at large, policymakers must be encouraged to turn to the source, to speak to the students. Finally, encouragement means saying to students who believe that school does not matter (perhaps because they have been told of or exposed to an education based on a deficit model) that someone believes in them, believes they will

be successful if they focus. Someone needs to raise the bar and to remind students to meet it.

Recognize

Children, in particular, need recognition for the work they do well. Praise what they do correctly, rather than penalizing what they do incorrectly.

> So I get to like have my name on the wall. It was pretty cool. A picture on the wall. A picture for being valedictorian. I haven't seen it yet but my friends have seen it and they told me. So it's exciting.

The sterile environment of the classroom, due in part to test anxiety, does not recognize the hard work of students. For Lorena, Amore, and Nur, recognition came when they delivered their valedictorian speeches in front of their schools. They spoke of their time in high school together, recognizing the key players in their success, and the successes of their classmates, as seen in the following excerpt form a graduation speech:

> We don't have to look for celebrities or great leaders for inspiration. In this very room, there are many of you that have taken the risk of rejection. Let's take a look at [Student Name]. He had no idea how he could keep up with the younger, yet more experienced cheerleaders while being the school's mascot. Nevertheless, he took the courage to try out and he made it and fit in just right! You would never expect a jock to be a thespian, but that is untrue when it comes to [Student Name]. Instead of just playing football, he decided to participate in the UIL one act play. Although they didn't make it at district, he felt really good being on stage, and the friendship that he made with a different group of people was priceless. [Student Name] risked rejection when she did a solo in a large audience. At the choir pop show in 2003, she decided to sing a song about her faith. She was afraid how people would handle it because of political correctness, but then tons of people came up to him and told him how much they had loved it. Last, but certainly not least, [Student Name] admitted that when she was in journalism last year, she was afraid people might not like the story she wrote in the newspaper. She was afraid to

> do an interview, and she even thought about dropping out of newspaper. However, after the support that she received when the newspapers were published, she had gained more confidence in herself. In fact, this fall, she will be attending [College] to pursue a career in journalism.

Recognizing the success of her peers, Nur shared with her classmates, publicly, her sense of awe about these students and in turn made them feel extraordinary.

Deficit-models assume children are born at a disadvantage from their peers. A first step in dismantling deficit thinking and at-risk labels is rewarding, through recognition of hard work, the promise in a student's life. Despite their struggle in one area, recognize the areas where they do succeed. A second step is the realization that whereas some students are born on the escalator and others at the base of a stairwell, all students must learn to recognize in themselves the possibility of promise. Practitioners may consider a system that rewards every student in their classroom on a weekly or bimonthly basis for each student's particular skill. In other words, calling a student the "best painter" instills in that student a sense of pride in his or her work, a pride that conveys to the academic and perhaps later the social environment.

Belonging

The final theme that echoed throughout this research was the lack of belonging these students experienced throughout their journeys to higher education, but more important, the sense of security they took from what little belonging they had from their homes, their families, or their peers. This final recommendation sums up the key to this level of analysis. We, practitioners and policymakers, cannot forget that these students, all of them, belong to us, and we to them. The future of this

country rests on these young minds. To separate, sort, and discourage or encourage indifferently does a disservice to the utility of community. Belonging to a community means learning to acknowledge one's peers' strengths and weaknesses, equally recognizing one's own, and lending a hand or engaging in health competition in the learning process. We, as practitioners and researchers, must recognize our own responsibility to make all students feel as though they are free to belong to the learning environment.

In her research on belonging in the early elementary years, Halaby (2000) created a community in her classroom, emphasizing that her students were not simply peers but also family. She used weekly town meetings to reinforce the notions of community, responsibility, respect, and belonging. This final recommendation is first to practitioners: Approach the learning environment as you would a community meeting where diverse interests, viewpoints, and voices merge as one for the betterment of the community. Students are diverse and able learners, when the incentives, encouragements, and recognition are established; they need only to feel secure to explore the learning environment. Of note, students who are labeled at risk may lack a secure environment or community at home. Providing that community in the classroom is the first step in ensuring they are free to engage in their learning.

Inc conclusion, the most important recommendation of this research is the dissemination of this information. Students must read about other students who live a similar life to their own and who, despite the odds, persevere. This is a recommendation both for practice—to share the stories with generations of students

labeled incorrectly as at risk—and for research—to collect more stories of student who are beating the odds everyday. The implications for future research include the need to gather and disseminate this information to the people who need to hear the message and recognize the experience.

Implications for Future Research

In discussing the students he worked with, author Gregory Mitchie reveals the truth behind students labeled at-risk;

> [They] are much more than mere "at-risk" youth, more than simple products of a "volatile" neighborhood or a "chaotic" school system. They are bright, beautiful, fragile, flawed, courageous, and incredibly resilient young people – kids whose voices ring with passion and genius, frustration and regret, rage and pain, and – most of all – hope and possibility. They are the kids who are too often shouted down or ignored. They have a lot to say. Holler if you hear (Mitchie, 1999, p. xxii).

The next step to this research is action. In this analysis the focus remains on collecting the individual-in-context experiences from a phenomenological perspective, employing critical ethnographic methods to gather information. The process of understanding, a term that itself is wrought with hegemonic power and subjective ways of knowing, does open the dialogue between people in power and people who re the subject of that power. In this case, power is defined by education policy. Future research should continue to "hear" and "see" the students, our constituents, who every day are labeled, quarantined, preached to, discouraged, and subjected to the omnipotent will of policy written, in a metaphoric sense, from a galaxy far, far away. The understanding should never stop. However, from this initial

presentation of reframing class as an environmental experience, educators and policymakers should continue to focus on the students.

The constellation should be used to expand the notion of individual-in-context. A population of students, much like the stars in a night sky, is linked by common experiences, institutions, and individuals. The stars in the lives of each of these students provided stability, strength, mentorship, and on some occasion, modeled behavior that encouraged growth, courage and resiliency. The photographs are both real and metaphor, a vision shared by the student to, in the deafening silence of the voiceless mass of students left behind, share his or her life, to provide a glimpse of the world as he or she sees it. The image of Orion the Hunter, from astronomy books and constellation guides, is an image in our minds, an image made from imaginary linkages between individual stars. If one steps back from these photographs, the mind begins to see the connections and to tailor the image. The constellation model serves to bring together the pieces of a life, situated within a large and noisy world of labels and stereotypes, the stars, the connections, the strategies for success. These seven students are the beginning of a new astrology, a new way of "seeing" and "hearing" and asking the right question, "Will you tell me your story?"

Future research should use the four preliminary recommendations from this analysis and expand on them. Policy research should emphasize the importance of knowing the student condition before writing, into law, unequal and ineffective policies. The understanding phase of this research will never end. However, a final implication for future research is to use these initial stories to develop both a

qualitative and a quantitative measure or model for intervening in the lives of students who run the risk of being left behind. The qualitative intervention, based on the lives of those students who did beat the odds, should identify the pathways of resilient students and, from those pathways, generate a typology of resilient behaviors or factors. Once generated, this typology may translate to a quantitative, self-report scale for predetermination or identification of resilient traits in students.

EPILOGUE

This dissertation ends on the same note it began, my experiences. Integral to this process was first the recognition of me in the research, recognition both of my role as a listener, as a peer, and as a friend. I learned that the students who agreed to participate in this project did so because they wanted to be heard. They replied to either my e-mail request, forwarded to them by the program directors, or to my presentation at the weekly program meetings. They heard me say that I am a first-generation college student, that I am far from my home, and that I want to write a book about student success. Sixteen students wrote or spoke to me. I spent countless hours chatting on e-mail, in person at the dining hall, or occasionally in my office about life, school, and the research.

In the conclusion I mention the need for future research, a prerequisite it seems, for all doctoral dissertations. Here, in the epilogue, I want to focus your attention on the need for action. I set out to write a dissertation that would allow me first to understand and second to move towards action. However, I found the "understanding" piece to be a far more daunting and all consuming task. So I settled to first develop a sense of understanding, a holistic view of resiliency from the perspective of students who already proved themselves resilient. Now my work will focus on putting to use what I learned. Action may take the shape of programs that highlight and tease out at-promise factors in struggling or at-risk youth. Interventions designed to bring the stories of students who successfully beat the odds into the

classrooms of students who cannot see their own potential through the barriers life presents.

The most important message I learned during the process of collecting information, listening to the stories of these students, was that this research is not unique, albeit necessary. These students are not unusual, in fact, they are the very opposite. They exemplify a cross-cut of a university population that was branded as at risk because of their childhoods, their status as first-generation students or their family income. Their stories are recognizable to many but heard by none. And here is where this research becomes essential to the discussion of at risk students. Acting on the findings I find myself moving away from the research and towards the engagement or the partnership opportunities in the community. This is a grass roots movement, deconstructing prevailing paradigms about risk and deficit, but this research taught me that these special, though not atypical students, exist. And that they have a story to tell. So, the irony of this dissertation is that although the focus was on understanding, the purpose was to develop an action plan. And, with that action plan in hand, I go in search of at promise factors, armed with the strategies of successful and resilient students.

A profound moment in this process occurred at the end. I met a student at a coffee shop to pick up her camera and catch up on her winter break. She started to tell me a story and then turned to me and said, "It is really nice to have someone who knows me so well to talk to." At that moment the power of this research, research generated by the students themselves, hit me. The truth is that I do know these

students, my students, well. And they in turn know me. We met over lunch, ice cream, and coffee and sometimes hunched over my desk to talk. They talked about their lives, and inevitably I talked about mine. We, together, made meaning of the hurts and the triumphs in each other's life. I thought about my own experiences while I transcribed their tapes. I thought about my relationship with my father and my mother. Dad's insistence, despite his declining health, that I return to complete my education at graduate school. I thought about the day my sister was accepted to a small, liberal arts college and the pride that radiated from my parents' collective grin. I thought about buying my first college sweatshirt, studying for the SAT, and later learning that I did not score high. I remembered my second-grade teacher, and my fourth, my junior high math teacher, and the boys that teased me.

This dissertation taught me that these young men and women overcame enormous odds, without acknowledging their journey, to follow their dreams. They were focused, steadfast, and willing to climb the stairs. They risked ridicule and scrutiny from family and friends for the decisions they made regarding their academic choices, but still they climbed. They arrived at the doorstep of higher education with a collection of tested strategies for overcoming any obstacle, and they did so without any sense of their talents. I learned humility from these students as well as a deep respect for their process of making meaning of their lives. I learned selflessness and courage from their willingness to spend time with a stranger and share their painful and joyful memories without excuses and without remorse. I discovered the camera

as a tool of communication and a new form of expression that does not require the interaction of a "researcher."

As a final goodbye, I asked each of the students if they would share their thoughts on this journey we undertook. Their responses are listed below, without acknowledgement of author. Thank you for reading this dissertation. I hope you experience a paradigm shift or a moment of transcendence when you see how these students harnessed their promise and developed their strategies.

> Wow! I can't believe you're almost done with your dissertation! Congrats! At first, I was a little uneasy reading about my life on paper, especially the part about my biological father. Nonetheless, it was definitely a positive experience—It's not everyday that somebody would want to write your life story! Now, I feel as if you know a lot more about me than some of my closest friends, even relatives. I'm glad that I was able to spare a few minutes of my time for your final project!
>
> It's not often in life that you get a chance to tell your story to others, so when I first heard about the opportunity, I immediately took it. I wasn't exactly sure what I was getting myself into, but the idea of being part of something others were going to study and learn from was very intriguing. I've always been one to learn a lot from my experiences, and I've always had a desire to pass on advice and knowledge to others-so that they can lead better lives. It's hard for me to open up to strangers, but I found it very easy to answer the questions Jess would ask me. Some of that comfort had to deal with the fact that this dissertation serves a powerful purpose, so ultimately, I had no problem contributing to something that was for the advancement of others out there like me. Throughout my involvement in this dissertation, I was able to critically think about myself and who I am—something we can't do anymore because our jobs or classes take too much of our time. It's important to reflect on where we came from and where we want to go in life, because otherwise we lose touch with who we are. I can't thank Jess enough for helping me to do that; she helped me discover things about myself that I had never seen. I learned that I am much stronger than I think I am, and that I am capable of more than I set out for. I only wish that everyone could share their knowledge as well because it would be a tremendously resourceful way to learn about life, and could serve as a technique for schools to apply and teach students about what lies ahead of them. A lot of energy and money is spent nowadays in trying to reform students by setting guidelines and rules and dress codes

that authorities are forgetting to listen. Allowing students to express themselves, like Jess did, is a helpful way to get students to not only learn but teach others about achieving more. This experience improved my ability to reflect on what my life has meant, and what I want it to mean in the future.

I have truly enjoyed having the opportunity to tell someone else a great part of my life and who and what make me who I am. When all of these memories were brought about it truly touched me into knowing that my story would be shared with the rest of the world. Maybe now, someone would understand me and know where I come from. Recollecting old memories definitely made me appreciate life and the wonderful people who I share it with. For all of my accomplishments would not be possible without the support of my family and friends, for they are the backbone to my body. For without them and the many blessings of God, I could not stand. At this point in my life, I can't give up in this continuous struggle to succeed but I know I can do it!

Being able to participate in the dissertation was a great experience for me. Being able to share my background with someone I had barley met seemed fairly easy for some reason. While sharing my life long story I came to realize all the obstacles and situations that I have had to overcome to be where i am today. There were many memories brought back to me while trying to remember how my educational career started and also reminded me of all those people who had a great impact in my life. My family and my teachers where the crucial factors in my success. If it weren't for them then I would probably not be here today. Being able to share my life with not one one person but to the public is somewhat rewarding. Not very many people know the obstacles and situations that minority, low income students have to face to be at the level of an average student and in most situations we have to work twice as hard to get where we want to be. This is a wonderful dissertation since now the public will be getting an insight to the lives of minority students who share there experiences with the public through a book that an excellent grad student decided to do. Hopefully this dissertation will make the public think twice when they see a minority student on campus of all the barriers this student had to overcome to be in the position they are right now. Not only did the student have to overcome educational barriers but also family barriers as well. Overall this was a very rewarding experience for me and it was my pleasure sharing my life time story which will hopefully make a positive impact in the lives of the readers. Thank You for giving me this wonderful opportunity.

As a researcher, as a doctoral candidate, and a future colleague, I will take with me a humble respect for the individuals who participate in research for the

greater good of the population. I will never forget that it is always more valuable to go to the source, to ask a question and to wait for the answer, to engage in conversation rather than interview, and to build trust by in turn giving trust. This was the most powerful experience of my graduate education.

APPENDIX

CONSENT FORMS

Informed Consent to Participate in Research
The University of Texas at Austin

You are being asked to voluntarily participate in a research study. This form provides you with information about the study. The Principal Investigator (who is in charge of this research) will provide you with a copy of this form to keep for your reference, and will also describe this study to you and answer all of your questions. Please thoroughly read the information below and ask any clarifying questions before deciding whether or not to participate in the study. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw without any penalty or incident at any time. This study was approved by the University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board on June 13, 2006.

Title of Research:

Finding Their Way: Navigating Social Class Barriers to Higher Education

Principal Investigator, UT affiliation

Jessica Geier, Doctoral Student, Educational Administration

Funding Source:

None

What is the purpose of this study?

This study develops a theoretical framework that emerges from critical ethnographic and authoethnographic research to engage stories both as a reflection on past journeys as well as an introspective understanding of how to go forward.

I seek to address the following research questions:

How do students describe their preparation for the college experience?
How does social class influence the student's perception of preparation for or access to higher education?
How do college students make meaning of their world?
How can personal stories be used to inform education policy?

What will you be expected to do to participate in this research study?

Phase 1: *Writing your life story*. Once they have agreed to participate in the project, signed consent forms, and chosen a pseudonym, participants will be provided the following writing prompt:

> *Given everything that has happened in your life how did you come to be a student at the University? Thinking as far back as you can, you may choose to write on any topic you wish as it relates to your memories of growing up; such as attending school, your relationships with family, friends, and your community, work experiences, your feelings and emotions, your hopes, fears, and your dreams.*

Participants will be told that they have one month to write their life stories. They will also be told that the researcher will check-in, via email, with you once a week to see if they have questions, concerns, or wish to talk about their writing. During these check-in emails the researcher may offer some examples of autobiographical writing, if the participants wish to see an example.

Phase 2: *Semi-structured, open-ended interviews*.
Each of the interviews will last approximately 1 ½ - 2 hours. All interviews will be recorded for future research purposes with the consent of the participant. Each participant will engage in two interviews.

Interview #1: Here the participant engages in a co-creation of meaning, identifying themes that appeared in their life stories as well as discussing areas in their lives that helped them to overcome the perception of barriers to higher education. The format of the interview will be open and interactive. This first interview is meant to be an assessment, co-collaborate upon by researcher and participant, of the journey the student has taken to arrive at higher education.

Interview #2: This interview will also provide the participant with the opportunity to affirm or disaffirm the themes raised in the first interview as well as offer a finer-grained analysis of his or her journey to higher education and how that journey may inform his or her future progress through higher education.

Phase 3: *Photography.* Participants will "capture" images of their lives over the winter break. At the end of the second interview the researcher will provide each participant the opportunity (and a disposable camera) to become the research through the use of photography. The student will be asked to photograph an image that portrays "What they aspire to either during college or after they complete college." Equally they may choose to photograph what they aspire *not* to. The photographic portion of data collection is meant to provide the student participant the opportunity to provide his or her own lens on their hopes and dreams, thus drawing a connection to the initial writing prompt and a conclusion to the pathway premise.

What are the possible discomforts and risks?
Participants may choose to discontinue your participation at any time. Their identity will be kept secret to everyone outside of the research team through the provision of a pseudonym. All participants will choose a pseudonym after completing the consent documents and will, henceforth in the research, be known only by that name. Participants will be encouraged to stop the interview or writing process at any time to take a break, ask the researcher a question, or simply to step away from the research.

What are the potential benefits for you?
The story that each participant writes and the interview process may result in a well-articulated plan for overcoming future barriers as well as strategies for persistence at the college-level. Each participant will also have the opportunity to recall and preserve important memories in the form of a life story.

If you choose to take part in this study, will it cost you anything?
No.

What if you are injured because of this study?
This study involved no physical risk other than what you would normally encounter. However, there is a potential risk for emotional or mental harm. No payment can be provided in the event of a medical problem, but the researcher will provide all participants with the contact information for Student Health Services to preempt any emotional disturbance that disclosure of life experiences may cause.

If you do not want to take part in this study, what other options are available to you?
Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to refuse to be in the study and the refusal will not influence current or future relationships with [Removed to Protect Students' Confidentiality Rights]. Your participation or lack of participation will not affect your standing with the University or its departments in any way. You can choose to withdraw at any time, and if you do withdraw, I will destroy any data I have collected from you.

How can you withdraw from this research study and who should you call if you have questions?
If you wish to stop your participation in this research study for any reason, you should contact: **Jessica Geier** at (512) 626-0493 or geierj@mail.utexas.edu. You may also wish to speak with Jessica's dissertation advisor, Dr. Patricia Somers, (512) 471-3304 or pasomers@mail.utexas.edu. You are free to withdraw your consent and stop participation in this research study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits for which you may be entitled. Throughout the study, the researcher will notify you of new information that may become available and that might affect your decision to remain in the study.

In addition, if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or if you have complaints, concerns, or questions about the research, please contact Lisa Leiden, Ph.D., Chair, The University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, 512-232-4383. You may also contact the Office of Research Compliance and Support at 512-471-8871.

How you your privacy and the confidentiality of your records be protected?
Research data will be kept in a locked cabinet at researchers' offices and in a password protected electronic folder on the researcher's desktop computer. The life stories provided by students will be re-typed, if necessary, to avoid identification of handwriting. Participants who handwrote their life stories will be provided the original document after previewing, for accuracy, the typed version. All interviews will be recorded. In all recorded conversations the participant will be referred to by a pseudonym. The recordings will be transcribed by the researcher and will therefore be heard solely for the purpose of research. The recordings will be maintained in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home office for future analysis.

If in the unlikely event it becomes necessary for the Institutional Review Board to review your research records, then the University of Texas at Austin will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law. Your research records will not be released without your consent unless required by law or court order. The data resulting from your participation may be made available to other researchers in the future for research purposes not detailed within this consent form. In these cases, the data will contain no identifying information that could associate you with it, or with your participation in the study.

For this purpose and any future publication or presentation of the results of this research, your identity will not be disclosed. We will remove any identifying characteristics.

Will the researchers benefit from your participation in this study?
This research is being conducted for the purpose of satisfying the requirements for the Doctorate in Educational Administration. It may also serve as an opportunity for publication.

Signatures:

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

_____

Signature and printed name of person obtaining consent Date

You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

Printed Name of Subject	Date
Signature of Subject	Date
Signature of Principal Investigator	Date

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VITA

Jessica Lynn Geier was born in Concord, Massachusetts, to Gregory and Kathleen Geier. She spent the first 7 years of her life in western Massachusetts and later, the remainder of her years at home in Cumberland, Maine. Her early years in elementary and secondary education were shaped by strong teachers, athletics, and volunteer opportunities that exposed her to the value of a good story and the importance of action. Jessica's sister Jamie is the first in her family to attend college, and later, to receive a doctorate in Public Health, Epidemiology from Columbia University. Jessica attended Boston College for both her bachelor's and master's degrees and later The University of Texas at Austin to complete a doctorate in Higher Education Policy. Upon completing her degree, Jessica returns home to New England, to join her husband, a baker in Providence, Rhode Island.

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